



## **Curs in the Weeds** by [lilylittle](#)

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**Summary:** Jim Hopper was just a teenager when his best friend went missing one night. The town of Hawkins was shocked by her disappearance. However, as the years passed by, she became another statistic of missing young people across the country. With the disappearance of Will Byers, Hopper realises the case is more close to home and similar than he first realised.

# 1. Prologue

CURS IN THE WEEDS

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 1963

The small town of Hawkins was unusually quiet for a Saturday evening. Families joined together to enjoy quality time together playing board games and enjoying the treat of pizza from the local pizzeria. The roads were all but scarce of vehicles, and a low mist sat heavily upon the quaint town. Though it was still early evening, with a few hours still left before the sun bid goodbye to the town for another day, night impatiently waited for its turn to engulf it.

The only sound that could be heard was the hollering coming from the parking lot behind the bowling alley.

"Seven strikes!" Jim Hopper, aged eighteen, hollered. "Seven! I forgot how good you were!"

Caroline Browne blushed profusely at his comment, before she playfully bowed. She chuckled as they walked alongside each other to the vehicle. "I did learn from the best," she said, tipping her head towards him.

"And I regret teaching you now," he said with a wink. "I don't think I'll be able to show my face around these parts again."

"I don't think you can," Caroline smirked. "We'll have a rematch next weekend. I'll let you win."

"Fighting talk already, huh?" Jim replied. "You're on, Miss Browne... wait, I can't do next week... I'm, uh... meeting Diane's parents."

Jim could not see the disappointment and sadness on Caroline's face for she bowed her head at the mere mention of his girlfriend's name. It was only when they reached the vehicle and Jim looked over at her and noticed that she had quietened. He could not put his finger on why his best friend had fallen silent but before he could question it,

she met his gaze and offered him a smile.

"That's... nice," she replied awkwardly. "Big step, huh?"

Jim narrowed his eyes at her and found himself nodding. "You bet. I'm nervous as hell. She thinks it's time."

"And you don't?"

"Honestly?" Jim asked, to which Caroline nodded. "No."

Caroline chewed on her lip and nervously rubbed the back of her neck. "It'll be good for you. Maybe."

"You think it's time to meet her parents?" Jim asked, his eyes searching hers. He knew he could always go to her for honest advice. They'd been best friends ever since they could understand what friendship was, and they had both been each other's support system throughout school. As they grew older, it seemed as though their friendship matured even more. There was a mutual respect, with Jim being the protective friend thanks to his growth spurt one summer three years ago, and Caroline's empathy.

"I can't really say, Hopper," Caroline shrugged. "If it feels right then go for it."

Jim nodded, though he was still unsure. He didn't want to disappoint Diane by telling her he was scared that their relationship was quickly becoming serious. He hadn't expected the relationship to come to anything other than a hook up at a party. Diane was a nice girl who wanted to know more about him and would ask him questions about himself, even though he hated talking about himself and his feelings. But she was a great person and he enjoyed her company. He noticed the change in dynamic with his friendship with Caroline since he began dating Diane. Every waking moment, if he wasn't at school with her, would be spent with Diane, and his friendship with Caroline was beginning to suffer. With the pressures of school, and looking for colleges, it seemed as though neither had time for each other.

"We'll go the weekend after?" Jim asked, his heart hoping she would

agree to his offer. "I'll pay."

Caroline watched him for a few moments before nodding. "I'll hold you to it," she winked in response.

They pulled open the doors and slid into the vehicle. Caroline shivered at the coldness of the weather, as Jim started the engine. He reversed out of the empty parking lot and began to drive on the empty streets. Neither one of them spoke for a while. It wasn't that neither of them didn't know what to say, but rather in fact they didn't know how to say it. So, they remained silent and watched the road ahead. Caroline bit her lip and turned to Jim who, feeling the shift in her attention move to him, glanced over at her.

"I've been accepted into college," Caroline began, her voice less excited than she had anticipated. She watched Jim swallow the lump in his throat before he breathed out deeply.

"Wow," Jim replied, in shock. "Wow... where?"

"New York," she answered. Caroline never expected how hard it would be to tell him. She had memorised the acceptance letter and could repeat it word for word, the excitement within her causing her to run through the house. And when she thought about being accepted into college and finally leaving the small town of Hawkins, she didn't realise just how hard it was to tell him. Her parents were ecstatic, but the one person whose reaction meant the most to her was Jim's.

"Wow," Jim repeated. "You're getting out of this place then, huh?"

"I am," Caroline whispered. "Are you happy for me?"

Jim was silent for a moment, and it was that moment of silence that had answered her question.

"Yeah," Jim said. "I am... I really am. I'm happy for you, sweet."

The rest of the journey was filled with silence. As the vehicle came to a stop outside her house. They both sat in silence for a moment, before Caroline turned to Jim. She observed his broody expression, the clenched jaw, the narrowed eyes. He moved his attention to her

and offered her a sad smile. Caroline felt sadness grip her heart and felt the burning in her throat. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Hey," Jim started. "Why... why are you crying?"

She wiped her eyes and let out a sob. "It's all real now," she whispered.

"But you're getting out of this place," Jim replied. "That's something, right? You're one of the lucky ones, Caro."

"But I'm leaving you," Caroline whispered, her voice breaking and failing her.

"No, you ain't," he replied. "You're stuck with me. I've told you before. I ain't going anywhere."

Caroline smiled sadly. "Do you think things will be different between us if I go?"

Jim reached for her hand at that moment, and placed her hand, palm upwards, in his. He placed his hand next to hers where a jagged scar stretched across both of their hands. He gently pressed the scar on her palm, and then pressed his.

"Nothing will change, I promise," Jim replied honestly. "You know too much."

Caroline chuckled sadly, and wiped her tears with her free hand.

"You feel sad, stressed, or you're just bored," Jim began. "I'll be right there."

"You promise?" Caroline whispered, to which Jim nodded. "I love you, Hopper."

Her words filled the vehicle, and her heart jolted with panic. Her feelings towards Jim had never once been mentioned or spoken about. She had been too scared to admit her feelings for him; she had hoped they would dissipate with time, but it seemed that every moment they spent together only confirmed her feelings for him. But she couldn't tell him; she had too much respect for him and Diane.

And she was scared to tell him just in case it scared him away from being friends with her.

"I mean... uh," Caroline said quickly.

"I love you too, Caro," Jim said, his voice deep and honest.

"I should go," Caroline whispered. "I told my mom I'd be home by six."

"Yeah, okay," Jim replied.

Caroline exited the vehicle and shut the door behind her. She quickly walked around the vehicle and onto the sidewalk. She waved him goodbye and began to turn towards her house. The sound of a car door shutting behind her caused her to turn slightly, as Jim closed the gap between them. He was breathing heavy and his eyes were intense. She stared up at him and it was then that she understood the trueness of both their words. It hadn't been a slip of the tongue. It hadn't been a mistake.

They loved each other. They were young and naïve, but they understood their feelings for each other meant more than just friends.

As he bent down and brushed his lips gently against hers, it felt like the world had exploded around them. And in that moment, everything made sense.

The kiss came to a natural end, and Caroline shyly hid her blushed cheeks into his clothed chest. A chuckle escaped Jim, and he gently lifted her face to him. And though it was unspoken, he understood what he had to do. And that was to tell Diane how he truly felt.

As Jim Hopper drove away with the touch of her lips still upon his, he didn't realise that it would be the last time he would ever see Caroline Browne for she would disappear as night fell upon the quaint town of Hawkins.

## **2. Part One: Chapter One**

### **CHAPTER ONE: MILES FROM HOME**

**NOVEMBER 1983**

It was an unusually quiet night in Hawkins when Will Byers disappeared.

He had been riding home from his friend Mike's house on a late Sunday evening when he had heard it. It had been behind him as soon as he had left his friend Dustin at his house along the way. He kept his feet moving, his bike pedalling away as fast as he physically could from the overwhelming darkness. Panic had washed over him, and he understood that he needed to get away from it – whatever it was.

He had left his bike. And he had ran as fast and as stealthily as he could. The house had been quiet when he entered, and all lights had been off. He locked the doors and checked the windows before moving through the house. But no matter where he turned, he felt it. The looming presence of something unknown. The dog sensed it too, and for a moment, Will was surprised by that. As the dog barked around him, he knew he had to protect himself from whatever it was that was hunting him down.

His dad's gun had been kept in the shed ever since he walked out on the family two years ago. His mother, Joyce, had moved all his belongings out of the house and had kept them in the shed; she didn't need a bitter reminder of a man who scarpered from their lives. And so, he ran, through the kitchen and out of the back. As he ran to the shed, he stole a glance behind him and panic bolted through his entire body.

It was there: inching closer and closer, its darkness filling the night sky.

The shed had been a place that he used to love. A place where his father would teach him how to clean guns, how to put them back together again, how to hide away from chores. But now it had been



his only hope. The gun was hung on the wall. He reached for it, and pulled it down ungracefully. The bullets had been in the drawer of a cabinet, and he moved quickly to put the ammunition into the weapon. As his father's voice filled his head, telling him how to fill the gun properly, he pulled it away from the table and aimed it at the door. The shotgun was heavy in his hands, weightier than he remembered.

But what he didn't prepare for was that it had sneaked behind him. As he stared at the door, his eyes wide with shock and panic, it crept behind him. It let out a sound, loud enough for him to jump out of his skin, and turn around, shotgun now shaking in his small hands. But it was too late. It claimed him quickly with a screech.

The disappearance of Will Byers went unnoticed until the next morning, and it caused the entire town of Hawkins to turn upside down.

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The world had been so bright for much of her life.

For as long as she could remember, the world was a room filled with a bright white light following her at every turn. She would often be alone, or with scientists, or with another one of her – a girl older by only a few years. They would be dragged into a room with two chairs, a large mirror window taking up half of one wall, and machines that beeped incessantly. They would be tied down to the chair, with needles poking at them from all directions, have liquid injected into their body which would cause pain to disperse throughout their exhausted and bruised bodies.

Their only communication would be that of blinking, and when the pain came all too much for them, it was the only way to reassure each other. The routine was gruelling and even though they were used to the rush of people around them, the needles in and out of their skin and the relentless pain that engulfed them like a wildfire spreading through their body at an alarming rate, it still caused them such emotional and mental distress. And though it was and had been their life for many years now, they wanted nothing more than for it all to end.

And there had been a way out.

For Eleven, it was everything she remembered. All memories of hers was filled with pain, sadness and confusion. But for her, she remembered a life of happiness and love, and of a place so far from where she was now. Her memories had been frozen, and her mind struggled to conjure them up in times when she so desperately needed them.

The years had stretched by slowly, and though she remained young, time had knowingly passed her by.

But there had been a break in the usual routine. And they had used it to their full advantage. But their actions had repercussions, and severe ones at that. They had broken free, had stopped time for just a few moments and walked past the guards and military keeping them inside. They broke out of the compound in record time; she had timed it in her head once she was able to know the corridors, the entrances and exits of the building, the rooms that led off from the long interweaving corridors. It had taken time and skill to narrow down and see, like an eagle, the best way to escape. It had taken an immense amount of energy, and she knew she would be weak, but they had no other choice, and she had to remind herself of that.

Unfortunately, their efforts in escaping had not gone unnoticed. As time resumed, alarms sounded around them, and it was then they understood the dangers. Their bare feet pounded against the hard floor, just as loud screeches bellowed throughout the corridors behind them. The weaving corridors were filled with the sounds of dying men and women as the monsters claimed their lives. But they persevered and ran as though their life depended on it. And it had, unfortunately.

As they ran out of the compound, and the building that was Hawkins Lab disappeared into the distance, they allowed the woods to swallow them up. It was far safer being inside the woodland area than being confined within the large compound in that moment of time. They could protect each other better away from those people and the dangers that lurked behind their actions.

"Stay close to me," she had said, her voice sounding foreign and

weird. It had been a long time since she had spoken, and though it came out jolted, she hoped it would be enough for the younger girl to acknowledge the instruction as a serious one. The young girl nodded in response, and they traipsed through the woods in sync with each other, their eyes scanning the surrounding area like a hawk.

The darkness of the world calmed them more than they had thought it would, and they knew they had the thick blanket of night to protect them. They were so used to the intrusive bright light that revolved around them, that they sought comfort from the dark.

And though they walked with nothing but the medical gowns adorning their bodies, they acknowledged that they could protect themselves in ways others could never truly fathom.

An out building came into view and they both looked around for any sign life. Seeking nothing more stillness wrap around them in a never-ending whirlwind of trees, they rushed inside. Shelves filled with clutter adorned the wooden walls, boxes filled with forgotten comic books and outgrown hand-me-down garments were piled high against the solid walls, tall cabinets and a desk adorned the only windowed wall.

"Clothes," she said, motioning towards the boxes.

As the young girl rummaged through the boxes like a feral animal searching through trash, she pulled out pieces of material, observed them for a moment then threw them back in. The older girl looked through the other boxes, through the drawers of the cabinet and desk. She pulled out a map folded haphazardly and opened it quickly. A slight tear ripped through the paper at the seams, but she ignored it and placed it carefully upon the dirty ground and carefully examined it.

The young girl moved closer to her and knelt beside her, a bundle of clothes tightly grasped in her hand.

After a moment, she glanced at the young girl and pressed her finger upon the map.

"Home," she whispered, her voice intense and sad.

"Home," the young girl repeated, her voice new.

"Your name..." the older one whispered. "What is it?"

The young girl looked dumbfounded and after a small moment, she shrugged confused. "Name?"

The young girl glanced down at her wrist, the tattooed number scarred into her skin.

011.

"Eleven," the older girl whispered. "You're safe now, Eleven."

"Name?" Eleven repeated the girls question.

"They... those people, they called me 'one'," the older one said, showing her tattooed number. "But that's not my name... I had a name before..."

Eleven watched her as she furrowed her brow as she thought.

She spoke after a moment. "I think my name was Caroline."

### **3. Part One: Chapter Two**

#### **CHAPTER TWO: POISON OAK**

He often dreamed of Caroline.

Even after twenty years, the vision of her standing in front of him on the sidewalk was still burned in his mind as if it were yesterday. He still felt the way his skin prickled with nerves, the butterflies battling against each other in his stomach, the way his legs felt as though they were made of jelly. And he would feel the kiss still burn his lips, the softness of her hand in his. His dreams often taunted him, creating a life where she had been a part of it, and when he would wake, his mind clearing and heart hoping she would be there, it was a constant reminder of everything he had lost.

The years had not been kind to him. He had lost those he had cared about in a blink of an eye, fate taking away his happiness in one felled swoop.

His best friend disappearing that night had always unsettled him, and it was a major reason as to why he joined the police force. He needed the expertise for his own search for her, and it was only when he joined that he knew he was destined to help those in their moment of need. And in his spare time, after all this time, he still searched for her. He picked up on any leads that rang through. And even though there had been sightings of young girls who had looked like Caroline, they all came back negative.

He was so used to the hoax calls coming through, but he still had a small glimmer of hope that it was her calling. The possibility of finding her again after so long was slim, but Jim never gave up on finding her.

It was so out of character for her to just up and leave without telling anyone. She had always been close to her family, and they always knew where she was going no matter what. To have her never return home that night, something didn't sit right with Jim, especially as he had driven her home. The guilt had swallowed him up for a long time, and even now, he still felt guilty at not being there for her

when she needed someone.

He would travel to New York often, and spend the entire time searching the streets for her and handing out paper with her face printed on them. If she had decided to travel to New York that night, taking that chance, then someone, somewhere, would know where she was or would've seen her. It was only when he reunited with Diane that he distanced himself from the case, knowing that if he didn't, he couldn't be truly emotionally ready for her. And he needed to feel alive again. He had spent so much of his years searching for Caroline that he had become a man who was void of all love and emotion.

They had married quickly, and soon Diane was expecting their daughter. Sara had been born healthily in the hospital, and Jim had become the one thing he had always wanted to be: a father. And for the next few years, he made sure he was the father his daughter deserved.

He left work at the door, and played princesses with his daughter and read her as many stories as she wanted. They would spend hours fighting imaginary monsters in the back garden, and would eat together as a family every night. And it was then, seeing his small family around, that he felt true happiness after many years.

But it seemed as though fate dealt him another card, and one that caused his entire world to come crashing down around him.

His young daughter, his beloved Sara, had terminal cancer and there was nothing they could do to make her better. As the months they were promised dwindled down into a mere few weeks, Jim was beginning to close himself away from the world again. And it was when his daughter took her final breath in the early hours of the morning that the last strands of happiness he felt in his heart broke.

His world became dark and he became numb. He became angry at the world for allowing his young daughter to be taken from him and his wife in such horrific circumstances. He drank heavily to numb the pain and allow him to sleep and he smoked like a chimney to keep the anxiety away. He closed himself away from his wife, who, in her own grief, didn't see him beginning to spiral out of control. And so,

one day, a few months after their daughter was taken from them, Diane announced that she was leaving him. And though it came as surprise to him, he expected it. And it was that day, as he packed the last of his belongings into the back of his vehicle, that he realised he wasn't deserving of happiness.

It had been three years since Sara passed away, and each day he woke up and realised that his life had turned out in such a way, he despised everything. He found no happiness in the simple things anymore: the sunrise, the warmth of the sunshine upon his skin, the gentle breeze of summer, the birds chirping high in the trees, and the sound of logs cracking in the fire.

Every single day was the same old routine. He would wake early with a hangover that wouldn't shift all day; drive to work on the same roads even though he knew he was still drunk; spend the entire shift wanting nothing more than to find the nearest bar and drown his sorrows; drive home from work; grab a few beers from the fridge and drink himself into an oblivion; and wake up on the couch the next morning with an array of empty bottles surrounding him.

It was only in the mornings when he would stare at himself in the mirror that he realised that he had hit rock bottom.

But he had been there a while, and as stubborn as Hopper was, he didn't have the strength to save himself once more.

And while nobody else noticed his downward spiral and his struggle, he kept up an appearance that he was dealing with everything well, or as well as they expected him to be. The pain of losing a child was something that they understood was hard for him, and it was a pain so indescribable that he sometimes believed that she had been a figment of his imagination for all those years.

And so, as he pulled himself off the couch after another night of not making it to bed, he felt nothing but numbness within his body. He rubbed his tired face and stretched, his entire body protesting against another night spent on the hard and small couch. He reached for the half empty bottle of beer and the bottle of pills his doctor prescribed to him that sat amongst the array of Schlitz bottles, popped two pills into his mouth and swigged the beer. He sat back on the couch with a

sigh.

He hadn't given much hope towards the pills working. His doctor had been adamant that he took two tablets once a day. And Hopper followed his doctor's instructions, hoping that he would one day feel something.

He showered quickly, and dressed even quicker. The sky was still dark when he left the cabin, and as he drove to work, he decided to drive a different route. It was a route he didn't take too often, but every once in a while, he would, and it would bring back memories of a simpler time.

As his vehicle drove by three-one-seven Circle Drive, the ghost of Caroline stared at him. He slowed just a bit and watched as she smiled at him before fading into the air.

His knuckles paled as he gripped the steering wheel tightly.

He drove away quickly leaving scorch trails behind him, and he arrived to work with no recollection of making the full journey. Hopper sat in the parking lot for a while, his chest rising and falling in panicked breathing. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and he wiped them away quickly, before exiting and making his way into the station.

As soon as the doors opened, he was confronted with an array of sounds, sights and smells. He quickly moved into his office, aware of Florence's voice calling for him, and shut the door behind him. When she didn't enter his office after him, he knew she had gotten the hint that he was in no fit state to communicate just yet.

But as a knock sounded on his door, he groaned in frustration.

"Come in," he called after a moment.

Florence entered the room quickly and shut the door. "It's not even nine in the morning and it's crazy out there."

"What do we have today?" Hopper asked, his mind elsewhere.

"We have a few drunks out there who have not washed for a long



time," Florence began. "We have a stolen vehicle, a missing cat, and a missing child."

"A missing child?" Hopper asked. "Why didn't you start with that?"

"It's crazy busy out there, Jim," Florence responded.

"Who's the missing kid?"

"Will Byers, Joyce's youngest," Florence explained. "She's in the meeting room. She's frantic."

"A worried mother always is," Hopper replied, as he closed his eyes for a moment. He reopened them and stood to his full height. "Okay, let's check this out."

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A few miles away, Caroline and Eleven continued their journey to their destination. As the sun rose above them, they became increasingly cautious of any sound or movement around them. Eleven stayed close to Caroline who carried the map as though her life depended on it. With their attire somewhat different to how it used to be, they were both aware that the clothes they had found were not an ideal choice. The cool weather whipped around their bare legs as a large sweatshirt swallowed up their malnourished bodies.

Caroline understood that their choice in outfits would draw them attention, and so with a promise to Eleven, they would find better clothing as soon as they were able to find a house. It was risky decision to make, but it was something that needed to be done.

The first house they came across sat silent. They watched from the treeline as a family left for the day, the children packed and ready for school, the husband taking a separate vehicle to his wife. Caroline watched with baited breath as they drove away, and the house was empty of all beating hearts.

Caroline motioned for Eleven to follow her, and as the young girl fell in line with her, they moved quickly and quietly towards the house. Caroline raised her hand towards the lock of the screen door and heard as it unlocked. Moving her hand to the left, the door opened

fully enough for them to enter. They didn't waste time in rushing upstairs to the bedrooms, where they searched through the wardrobes and cupboards for suitable clothing for them both.

Caroline pulled out black leggings from the cupboard, and an oversized jumper from the back of the wardrobe. She rummaged through the shoe rack at the bottom of the wardrobe, and found a pair of black shoes that were a little too big for her feet. She pulled out a plain denim jacket. She knew they were items the woman wouldn't miss that much, or even remembered that she had it. As for Eleven, she pondered over the rail full of colourful clothes.

Once Caroline was done, she moved into the bedroom where Eleven stood, her eyes wide in awe. Caroline moved to stand beside the young girl and observed the clothes.

"Here," Caroline spoke. "This would look pretty."

Eleven watched as Caroline pulled a pink dress from the rail and handed it to her. With ruffling at the front and a long-skirted bottom, it was something that Eleven was in awe of. With wide eyes and excitement rushing through her veins, Eleven grabbed the dress with both eyes, and with a smile, Caroline left the girl to change.

Caroline moved out onto the landing, and it was then that she saw the photographs of the family hanging upon the wall. A hardworking father, a proud mother, two daughters, and a son smiled back at her, their moment of happiness frozen forever in time. She found herself smiling back at them. A tinge of sadness pierced her heart. She was sure she had a family, but time had dissolved her memories no matter how hard she tried to keep hold of them. The faces of her family were blurred whenever she closed her eyes, and it pained her to her very core.

"Pretty," Eleven's small voice came from behind her and she turned to see the girl dressed in the pink frilly dress with a denim jacket.

"Pretty," Caroline confirmed with a smile. The young girl smiled back to her as her eyes searched hers. Her face fell after a moment.

"Sad?" Eleven asked worriedly.

Caroline wiped the stray tear from her face. "No," she whispered. "Not sad. Promise."

It took Eleven a moment to ease her furrowed brow.

"We should go," Caroline said, to which Eleven nodded in response.

They made their way downstairs and without a single trace of them being there, Caroline closed the door with a gentle swipe of her hand, and locked it with a small rotation to her hand. They walked around the side of the house, and stepped onto the sidewalk where they blended in amongst the other people walking around them.

"Will... will they find us?" Eleven spoke, her voice soft and worried.

Caroline took a moment to answer. "No. I won't let them."

"Promise?" asked Eleven.

"Promise," Caroline responded honestly. "You hungry?"

Eleven nodded, aware of the rumble to her stomach.

"Good," Caroline said, pulling out a bundle of notes. "Breakfast is on the Miller family."

Caroline led Eleven to a diner. The bell rang above them as they entered the fairly quiet establishment, and they made their way towards a booth. As they sat opposite each other, a woman walked towards them with two menus in hand.

"Would you like to order food now or just drinks?" she asked, passing the menus to them.

"We'll have two plates of waffles, with cream and sprinkles," Caroline stated quickly. "And two waters please."

The woman smirked and nodded, jotting it down on her notepad quickly. She took the menus away with her and disappeared into the back.

"Waffles?" Eleven asked, her brows furrowing once more.

"They're good," Caroline replied. "They were my favourite. A long time ago."

She took a moment to look at her surroundings. The people milling around her were dressed so differently. The women were no longer in elegant dresses of various colours, their hair neat with delicate jewellery. The clothing that women wore now were of eclectic nature. It was a strange concept for her to experience. So much had changed over the years, and she hadn't been able to catch up.

Their breakfast was soon delivered, and they both began to eat more out of hunger than anything else. Neither one of them could remember the last time they had eaten something worth eating, but as they ate in silence, their minds went back to the place that had been their home for a long time.

Caroline picked up on Eleven's fearful eyes. She placed her fork down on her plate, and breathed deeply.

"This is the start, okay?" Caroline whispered. "No more pain, no more suffering, no more tests. We're safe now."

But what they didn't realise was that their escape was the catalyst for something so much darker than either of them could ever imagine.

## 4. Part One: Chapter Three

Author's Note: Thank you so much for reading! If you do enjoy please let me know what you think! All reviews are welcome and appreciated. Hope you enjoy!

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### CHAPTER THREE: ALMOST HOME

The house was everything she remembered it to be.

The years that had passed by had never changed her memories of it. It had been a permanent fixture for much of her life that it wasn't hard for her to recreate in her mind. She still remembered the scent of the roses placed next to the front door, the creak of the swinging chair on the porch, the smell of her mother's cooking filtering through the house as soon as she opened the door. Every little tiny detail that usually would go unnoticed, it became the only thing that made her get through the turmoil of the last two decades. And even though it had been a long time ago since she had been taken, it was still difficult for her to truly process all the emotions that overwhelmed her. The worry, the panic, the hope that had dwindled away.

It had all been too much for her. The testing, the injections, the overwhelming pain. It was confusing; why had she been taken and used in such a way. She hadn't known where she was or how close she had been to home, and for a long time, she wondered if she would ever be able to escape. The questions she would ask them would be left unanswered, her worry dismissed, her tears ignored. And as each day slowly ticked away, she began to wonder how much would she be able to take. Communication between scientist and test subjects was scarce. And over time, they soon realised the results regarding her abilities were astonishing.

She was stronger than they had originally anticipated her to be, excelling at every test they put forward for her to complete.

"Home," Eleven's voice filled the air around her.

Caroline kept her tearful eyes upon the vision of her childhood home she had recreated. As Caroline froze time for just a split second, she created, in her hand, the childhood home she never forgot. Eleven watched in awe as a miniature house twirled around and hovered above her palm.

"It's a ten-minute walk from here," Caroline explained.

"How long... has it been?" asked Eleven.

"I'm not sure," Caroline answered honestly. She closed her palm and the vision of the house in her palm disintegrated into thin air. Time resumed. She motioned towards the waitress and when she approached them, Caroline spoke. "Hi... you don't have today's newspaper, do you?"

"We do, indeed," the waitress replied. "I'll go get you one."

"Thank you," Caroline said appreciatively. As the waitress returned with a newspaper, Caroline thanked her once again. Once the waitress slipped out the back, Caroline examined the newspaper intensely.

The date printed on the newspaper read November 5th, 1983.

"No..." Caroline whispered. "It can't be... it just can't..."

"What?" Eleven asked.

"The last day I was here was November third nineteen sixty three..." Caroline said. "That was twenty years ago..."

"But..." Eleven began. "How old are you?"

"I don't know," Caroline said, and after a moment, she touched her face.

"What happened?"

"I had spent the evening with my friend, Jim... and he had driven me home, and we had kissed... and there had been a rush of light coming from all directions, and then nothing... just nothing,"

Caroline explained, her voice becoming breathless and upset. "He had driven away and then there were lights all around me. I can remember screaming for Jim. But he had already gone at that point..."

"Sorry," Eleven whispered sadly, reaching out for her.

"I was eighteen then," Caroline whispered. She moved her hand quickly towards the cutlery on the table, and holding a knife in front of her, she observed her reflection closely. Her skin was smooth of any creases or lines, her eyes had once been bright but were now bruised with tiredness, her hair once styled had been tied back tightly. "No... this can't be right..."

Confusion caused her brow to furrow, as her mind raced over the missing years. Though the years had passed her by, she had not aged a day.

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## **Hawkins Lab, Hawkins**

*"If you don't abide by our rules, you know what it will mean for you, don't you?"*

*She kept her attention on the blank wall in front of her and remained silent. Dr Brenner sighed with frustration, his mind racing as to what his next step would be. He stood against the wall, his back supported by the sturdiness, arms folded. The girl in front of him refused to look at him and he could tell by how adamant she was by her refusing to acknowledge him and he knew that he wasn't able to get through to her.*

*"Please... just talk to me," he pleaded. "I'll have no choice but to send you down there and I know that's the last thing you want."*

*It was at that moment that she looked at him, and as he stared at her, he was able to see the fear in her eyes. Her whole demeanour betrayed her, but her voice was strong. "Do it."*

*Dr Brenner looked aghast by her reaction. "I know this isn't what you want. And it doesn't have to be like this."*

*"I refuse," she said sternly. She stared at him intensely and he moved*

towards the door.

"I'm sorry, One. Maybe this time will teach you to follow our orders," Dr Brenner responded. "This is your third refusal. You know what this means now."

She moved her fearful gaze away from and gave a short curt nod. "A lifetime of punishment."

"You know you're smart, but that mouth of yours is getting you into serious trouble," Dr Brenner said, anger clipping his voice. "One last chance..."

She glanced at him once more but this time with a smirk etched across her face. "I'm ready to head down now."

Anger coursed through his veins and he felt it overwhelm him in that moment. He grabbed her harshly by the arm and dragged her out of the room, down the corridor, and towards the entrance way to the underground. She struggled against him, feeling as her bare legs give out beneath her as he pulled and hauled her down endless corridors. People wearing white coats came out of the rooms to see what the commotion was, and once they saw them pass them by, they re-entered their rooms once more, shutting the door behind them.

"Stop... stop..." she cried but they fell upon deaf ears.

"This is what you wanted so this is what you're getting!" he shouted at her. "Why do you make this so difficult for yourself?!"

Tears stung her eyes as friction burns began to form on her legs and feet. She had endured so much, and yet, this, was worse than everything she had ever had to face. The lack of control, the feeling of being dragged to the Upside Down, the fact that no one was stopping him.

They came to the double doors, and he stopped then. He placed his fingerprint against the machine and with a buzzing sound, the doors opened for him. The scientists within the room watched with trepidation as, without a word, he dragged the young girl towards the showers. The showers led them to main area to get to the entrance of the Upside Down. It disinfected people going in and out, stripping them of any chemicals



*before they entered and after they came back. To have any scent be airborne and attached to clothing, it attracted the monsters almost instantly.*

*Dr Brenner threw her into the showers, and even though she had been in them for many times, this time was different. The liquid that was sprayed upon her was not water, but rather a chemical. She had heard the stories milling around the compound, the torture endured by many. She had been in the Upside Down before, but mostly for tests to be completed. This whole thing was new to her.*

*As the chemicals and liquids stopped spraying upon her, the door to the main area opened.*

*"You may now step inside," Dr Brenner's voice came over the monitor. "Your punishment begins here. Be careful of the monsters."*

*"You're the monster!" she screamed at him before the root-like tendrils and membranes covering the entrance swallowed her up.*

*Dr Brenner turned to the scientists standing around, still silent and confused. "Keep her in there until I say so. Got that?"*

*As they nodded quickly in response, Dr Brenner left.*

---

The Upside Down had always been something she feared.

The screeching of the monsters had unnerved her more than she had wanted to admit. The tests she would be made to do always had one thing that was certain; a way out. She would be in a suit to protect her from the tendrils and membranes and the monsters. But this time, she wore nothing but a medical gown.

And it was then that she realised that she was truly alone. Her punishment was to survive, and she had no help or support if things took a turn for the worse.

But the monsters weren't the ones to be feared in the darkness, she was.

---

"I need you to follow my instructions carefully, okay?" Caroline said outside the store.

They had paid for their breakfast and had left shortly afterwards, newspaper in their possession. The urge to go home was high, but she knew they would be looking for her and that they would head to the last place she was seen, and the place she would most likely head to. And so, she had planned for them to stay at a motel for the night. The money she had taken from the house would only go so far, and Caroline understood she needed to be careful.

"We're going to act normal, okay? We're going to walk in there, and we're going to pick a few things. You pick out what you want, I'll take care of the rest," Caroline said, her voice shaky. Eleven nodded in response, and they entered the store together.

A playful jingle was playing over the sound system, and as Caroline glanced around at the customers and saw the jaded expressions upon their faces, she could tell the jingle was not something they were enjoying. They made their way down the freezer aisle confidently, where Eleven made her way straight towards the boxes of waffles.

"You liked them then, huh?" Caroline asked with a smile, to which Eleven nodded enthusiastically.

The young girl reached up for them on her tip toes. As the young girl was busy stocking up on waffles, Caroline moved towards the top of the aisle where the bags of beef jerky were stocked. Glancing around her and making sure there was no one in sight, she slipped one into the pocket of her jacket. She pocketed a few more quickly, cautious that she didn't catch anyone's attention.

"You got all that you wanted?" Caroline called out to Eleven.

"I like them," Eleven said with a smile.

"They are delicious," Caroline replied.

"Delicious," Eleven repeated with difficulty.

"Let's pay for these," Caroline said, but before they could move, a security guard came out from the side of her. Eleven was way in front

of her, excitedly carrying a bundle of boxed waffles.

"I'm going to have to get you to turn out those pockets," he said. Caroline felt her anxiety prick the back of her neck.

"I haven't done anything," she urged.

"Turn out your pockets now," he said sternly.

"I'm really sorry about this," Caroline said, her voice void of emotion. "But I have not stolen anything."

"You know, we don't like thieves," the security guard said. "We're going to have to call the police. Let them teach you a lesson and put you on the right path, girl."

"I'm homeless," Caroline said. "I have no money. I haven't eaten in days. Please."

"Too late for all that now," he said.

Caroline turned her attention upon Eleven who was stood watching with widened eyes. When she heard Caroline's voice fill her head, she knew she needed to get out of there safely.

"Run!" she said telepathically, and Eleven understood the order loud and clear. As more security guards surrounded Caroline, she knew that she could use her powers, but she didn't want to hurt anyone. Hurting people was something she wasn't about to do. The checkout guy notified them that the police had been called, and Eleven slipped out of the store unnoticed, the boxes of waffles clutched tightly to her chest.

## 5. Part One: Chapter Four

### CHAPTER FOUR: OLD NOW

As evening descended upon the town of Hawkins, Jim Hopper surprisingly found himself at the library.

It wasn't the place he expected to turn up at after a day of searching for the Byer's boy. But him and his team had found a few leads that didn't see quite right, and a few he had to dismiss straight away. He believed the boys disappearance was a simple case of him being missing, taken before he got home. They had found his bicycle a few hours after Joyce reported him missing, which had caused him some anguish and worry.

A lead had turned up and he had to chase it, for Joyce more than anything. A mother's worry was a profound thing, and he had to ensure he did everything in his power to at least have a breakthrough in the case. Though the bicycle was a huge one, he needed more. And so, he found himself at the library, avoiding the watchful gaze of Marissa.

He groaned inwardly and kept his eyes on the screen in front of him. He scrolled through the newspapers clippings, his eyes scanning the headlines quickly hoping that something would jump out. He ran through the information he knew about Will Byers disappearance, and nothing seemed to add up. It confused him to understand that there wasn't any evidence regarding him going missing, and other than his bicycle being abandoned at the side of the road, all leads amounted to nothing.

He furrowed his brow as he came to a news article. The headline shouted for his attention, and he zoomed in on the article.

***MKULTRA ACCUSED OF ABUSE.***

*It appears that MKULTRA are unable to escape the attention today as abuse is being reported due to a mole. The unnamed individual had been given special access to Hawkins Lab, but it seems that even the laboratory cannot catch a break.*

*The evidence is stacking against them and it appears they are doing all they can to cover things up. Our source claimed: "They're testing on people there. They think we don't know but it's obvious. They are very evasive and secretive within the Lab. I saw a room full of young girls dressed in nothing but medical gowns, and when investigated further, the rooms turned up empty."*

*Below is a photograph taken by our source. It shows a young teenage girl curled up on the floor, wounds adorning her skin.*

*It seems that MKULTRA are covering up their mistakes, but we aren't going to let that happen.*

Hopper's curiosity was spiked instantly. With a furrowed brow, he continued scrolling, his eyes widening further as he found more reports of MKULTRA. It seemed that once his mind had registered the name, he was quickly picking it out in more and more reports. Cases opened and closed quickly with no investigations granted. Sources popping up from inside and outside the Lab before being shut down. He wondered why it was being covered up so soon without a true investigation; he knew it was a lengthy process, and he wondered why they weren't open to an investigation if they had nothing to hide.

He scrolled to another article. Panic washed over him. His eyes narrowed and squinted at the image on the screen. The black and white photograph had startled him to his very core, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Caroline's face beamed back at him, a smile that reached her eyes, happiness radiating from her.

### *TEEN MISSING CAUSES PANIC THROUGH HAWKINS*

*Tragedy struck late last night when the parents of straight A student Caroline Browne returned home to find their daughter missing. The young student had a curfew of six p.m. on the Saturday evening. As the hours stretched by, her parents grew increasingly panicked when their daughter hadn't returned as it wasn't like young Caroline to be late for curfew.*

*John Browne sought help from the local authorities immediately with help*

*from his role as acting Governor of Hawkins. He stated: "My daughter isn't the type of child to miss a curfew. This is so out of character of her. Her whereabouts are unknown, and we can only hope she returns home to us soon."*

*Caroline had been seen out with her friend, Jim Hopper, a few short hours before her disappearance. She was in high spirits after finding out she had been accepted into New York University next Fall.*

*Have you seen Caroline Browne? If you know any information, please contact Hawkins Police Station.*

The case had spread across America like wildfire. At the time, it seemed that she would return any day, and all would be well. But as the days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, and the long months into long years, all hope of her return dwindled away. It pained him to wonder if she had left on her own accord, and whether she was safe and well wherever she was. If she had gone out on her own, had her decision to do so been the right one for her at that time?

But part of him knew she wouldn't leave without at least saying goodbye to him or letting her parents know of her departure from the town. It didn't sit right with him then, and it didn't sit right with him now.

He guessed her disappearance had made him pursue a role within the police department. He wanted to help others with finding their missing family members, or helping with crime in and around Hawkins. It had been tough but worth it in the end. Knowing that he was doing good things in a world full of bad allowed him to feel at ease with himself.

Was Will's disappearance similar to Caroline's disappearance?

The very fact that they both disappeared without a trace twenty years apart sent alarm bells to ring in his head.

He continued scrolling, more out of his own burning worry than anything. He wondered about MKULTRA and whether their disappearances meant anything. It was a far stretch but it was the

only lead he had, and even then, it wasn't much of one either. If he couldn't find Caroline then he was going to make sure he did everything in his power to find Will and bring him back to his family.

As he left the library and slid into his police truck, a message came over the radio.

"Hey, Hopper," an officer's voice filled his vehicle.

"Yeah, what you got?" he asked.

"You're gonna want to come and see this."

---

Eleven ran as fast as her legs could carry her. As soon as she was sure she was as far away from the store as she wanted to be, she came to a stop. Her lungs burned, and her breath was short and ragged. She placed the boxes of waffles on the ground next to her as she allowed the ground to catch her fall. She sat panting on the ground, and her gaze moved towards her surroundings.

The house that Caroline showed her in the palm of her hand was situated just a stone's throw away. The road was quiet, the house even quieter.

317 Circle Drive was a quaint and idyllic house. As Eleven looked around at her surroundings, she grabbed the boxes of Eggo waffles and walked towards the window as a light switched on. A long table and six chairs filled the room.

"MIKE!" A girl screamed in frustration from within the house. "What have I said about going in my room and taking my CD player?!"

"I haven't touched it, Fancy Nancy," he replied with a scoff. "I don't know where it's been!"

"What? That doesn't make any sense," Nancy replied confused.

"You don't make any sense," retorted Mike.

"Kids, enough!" another woman spoke as she carried in a bowl of salad. "If you can't be nice to each other at the dinner table then no

dessert for either of you. You're scaring Holly with your loud voices."

Eleven watched from the window as people milled around the dining table. As they all sat in their chairs, Eleven noticed the boy and the older girl kick each other under the table that seemed to go unnoticed by the older woman.

"Now can we all just have a family dinner in peace and talk about our day like normal people?" the woman asked, to which the two kids nodded. "Then you can go back to hating each other."

Eleven watched them from the window for a little while, her brows furrowing at the family unit. It was so strange for her to see a family, let alone them all being together. Papa would always stay in the same room as her when she would eat, and she never understood why. But now, in that moment, she understood. He had been her only constant for as long she could remember, and he cared about her so much. He loved her as if she were his own daughter, but he also hurt her in ways she couldn't describe.

She was young and naïve when it came to him. But Caroline saw them for what they were, for they did to so many of them, and knew that it was wrong.

"Mama," a small voice came from inside the dining room. "Window."

Eleven felt panic rise within her as she saw the young child sat in the high chair point her small finger at her, and before the family's attention moved towards her, she slipped away into the darkness.

---

The police truck screeched to a halt, and Hopper ceased the engine quickly. As he rushed inside the station, he was met by his colleagues, their faces sullen and confused. Hopper stared at each face intently, his confusion only increasing the more they stared back at him. He furrowed his brow and scrunched up his face.

"This better be good," he said. "I hope it's not just another drunken fart who can't take himself home."

"You're going to want to see this, Jim," Florence whispered before



leading him down the corridor towards the interview room. They slipped past it and moved into the room with a one-way mirror allowing them visual access into the room.

Hopper rubbed his face tiredly and Florence closed the door behind them, before she moved towards the window. She pulled down the blackout curtain and Hopper observed the rectangle window.

"She was brought in after she was caught stealing for Marnie's Store," Florence explained.

As his eyes focused on the girl sat at the table, he found himself moving towards it, his mouth ajar in shock and his eyes wide with alert.

"No..." he whispered, his voice failing him.

Sitting right in front of him in the interview room was Caroline.

## 6. Part One: Chapter Five

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who is reading and reviewing! Hope you enjoy the next instalment! I have ideas on where to take this running through my mind all the time but I would love to know what you guys would like to see happen. Let me know via a review or even private message me! Thank you!

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### CHAPTER FIVE: WEATHERED

Caroline Browne had never been in trouble with the law before.

She wasn't a trouble maker. She wasn't a liar. She was a good person; wholesome, kind and virtuous. As she sat in the police interview room, she felt every bit the criminal. Though her lack of judgement, in that moment, had caused her to be in trouble, she knew there had been no way around it. The security guards had been too close for comfort, and she knew that if she used her power, they would be gravely injured if not killed.

She glanced around the small room. A wave of anxiety washed over her as her memories snapped her back to being in the testing rooms. There was nothing inside other than the brown table and chair she sat at as well as another chair opposite her. Her hands were placed on the table, her palms facing downwards. She felt the scar on her hand burn, something it hadn't done for a long time. As she squeezed her hand into a fist, feeling her fingertips pressed against the jagged scar, she heard a heartbeat approach the room. With a gentle tap on the door, it opened to reveal a tall dark-haired man dressed in a police uniform.

"Hi," he said. "My name is Officer Callahan."

Caroline remained silent, her eyes fixed on him and following him as he walked past her and took a seat in the chair opposite her.

"Do you know why you've been arrested today?"

Caroline moved her gaze away from him and down to her hands. She

gave a short, embarrassed nod. He pulled out a small notepad and pencil. She heard the scratch of the charcoal against the paper and grimaced.

"Can you explain for me what your intentions were?" Callahan asked, his pencil poised and ready to write down her answers.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm homeless. I don't have any money. I haven't eaten in days."

Callahan bit his lip. "That's funny. You keep a good story up as that's exactly what you said when the security guards caught you."

"It's the truth," Caroline said.

"You were also spotted near Clove Street early this morning..." Callahan explained, his eyes searching the notepad for the relevant information. "... where the owners of a house on that street has reported some money missing. Clothes have also turned up missing. Do you know anything about that?"

Caroline shook her head slowly.

"That's funny. They said there was about a hundred or so dollars missing," Callahan explained further. "And there was a hundred dollars found on your persons. And you are also wearing similar clothes that have turned up missing."

"It's a coincidence," Caroline answered.

"But you claim to be homeless and have no money," he pushed further. "I don't like being lied to so why don't you start telling me the truth, yeah?"

Caroline knew it wasn't that simple. After a moment, she spoke: "The truth is never simple. There's always people that's going to get hurt."

Callahan furrowed his brow. "Are you in trouble?"

"Like I said," Caroline began. "The truth is never simple."

A knock at the door sounded at that moment and Callahan moved his

intense stare away from Caroline and onto the door. He gave the order for them to enter. Jim Hopper entered the room and tipped his head towards Callahan, motioning for him to leave. Callahan stood, leaving his notepad and pencil and left the room. Hopper watched the back of Caroline's head as she kept her gaze on her hand. With a deep breath, Hopper closed the door behind him and moved round to table. It felt like every step was weighing him down and each step caused his heart to thump violently against his chest.

As he sat down in the chair, he placed his hands palm down on the table. After a moment of seeing that she hadn't lifted her gaze up at him and had kept her attention on her hands, he flipped his hands over so that his palms were facing upwards. A jagged scar had been carved into his hand some years ago.

It took her all but a moment to glance over at his hand, her eyes widening in shock at seeing the familiar scar that matched her own. Her scar burned. He heard her take an intake of breath and saw as her head lifted. As her eyes met his, it felt like his heart had jumped into his throat.

"Hop?" her voice was low, child-like, scared.

"Caro..." he whispered, his voice equally as scared. "Where... where have you been?"

His eyes searched hers intensely. She faltered at his question and tears filled her eyes.

"The truth is..." she began.

"Never simple," he finished for her. "I get it. But you've been gone for a long time and you suddenly turn up out of the blue, out of nowhere... just like that. Where have you been?"

Hopper watched as she moved her tearful gaze from him, the teardrops falling from her eyes. She had never been able to lie to him. She knew that. He knew that. She had never been a good liar when it came to him being the judge. But she couldn't tell him this; it would put him in a lot of danger.

"I can't tell you," she whispered, her voice low enough for only him to hear. "They're listening."

Hopper turned towards the window, but Caroline's voice stopped him.

"Not them," Caroline said quickly. And at that, Hopper turned back to Caroline and narrowed his eyes at her.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice equally as low.

Caroline allowed her eyes to observe him for a moment. His eyes almost pleaded with her, and equally searched hers for the missing years they'd both lost.

"I can't tell you here, Hop," Caroline whispered. "It's not safe, and I can't put you in that danger."

Hopper kept his narrowed gaze on her, analysing her body language and looking out for the flared nostrils that signalled a lie. When her nostrils never flared, he nodded. She was telling the truth. He opened the notepad to a fresh page and scribbled onto the paper.

*Who's listening to us?* he wrote.

He slid the notepad and pencil towards her. Her eyes read his scrawl and took a deep breath. She picked up the pencil and scribbled upon the paper.

*The monsters,* she wrote.

He analysed her words and furrowed his brow. He scribbled a question mark onto the paper.

She picked up the pencil once more.

*People listen to everything. They see everything. They know everything. Nowhere is safe,* she wrote.

"Are you bullshitting me?" Hopper asked, frustration coating his voice. The tone of his voice caused Caroline to jump in shock. She shook her head, tears filling her eyes once more. She wrote on a fresh

page: *I escaped but I know they're after me. They don't care about killing people to get to me. I'm in danger, Hop. You have to believe me.*

*Where did they take you? Who took you? I can help you,* Hopper wrote.

Caroline stared at Hopper. She always tried to remember his face; the broad forehead, the cheeky grin, the soulful eyes. Though there were more lines on his face than she remembered, he hadn't changed a bit. Hopper caught her staring and narrowed his eyes at her, disbelief written all over his face.

*The CIA... MKULTRA,* she wrote.

As his eyes scanned her handwriting, he felt panic wash over him. He sat back in the chair, and ran his hand through his hair. His eyes remained on her and she watched he processed the information.

"You're free to go," he said, standing to his full height. "Come with me."

She stood up from her chair and followed after him. He led her down the corridor, to the booking station where he signed her out, and motioned for her to follow him out of the station. They walked out together, and he motioned for her to get in his vehicle, to which she followed his instruction.

Once inside, he turned to her. "You're going to tell me everything, okay? You're going to tell me where you've been, what they've done to you, okay?"

She nodded, and he started the engine. As he drove away from the station and towards his trailer in the middle of nowhere, he stole a glance at Caroline as she sat in his passenger seat. But unlike the ghosts of her that he would see, she was real this time.

## 7. Part One: Chapter Six

### CHAPTER SIX: SOMETHING FAMILIAR

The drive had been a long one, and Caroline had found the motion of the car journey to be a comforting one. With the presence of her friend close to her, at long last, she found her mind and body relaxing. It seemed as though it had been a long time since she was able to truly fall into a peaceful sleep. Though her dreams and sleep were short, she was still aware of the dreams that welcomed her. She dreamed about a place far away from Hawkins, and the Lab she had been confined in, kept against her will. She dreamt of home, a place which she had always wanted to run to but could never get to.

She was aware of Hopper's watchful gaze upon her; his eyes skimming across her face, the burn of a trail left behind as he tore his gaze away from her and focused on the road ahead. Her skin tingled at the knowledge and realisation that, though she was still far from home, she had the one person who had been at the forefront of her mind for so long right beside her. She knew from the intensity of the burn to her scarred hand that it was real, a sign that she was, at that moment, away from imminent danger.

As the vehicle came to a gentle stop, she woke slowly though her consciousness was lost on Hopper. She turned her attention to Hopper who stared ahead at the trailer in front of him. She noticed his attention was elsewhere, and as she moved her gaze onto the trailer, she tried to read his mind. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath in, she worked her energy around him.

After a moment, Hopper gasped in pain. He clutched at his own scarred hand in discomfort. "Gah..." he released, his eyes narrowed at his jagged scar.

Caroline snapped her eyes open and as she did, the pain to his hand disappeared. He moved his gaze accusingly towards her, and she glanced at him guiltily.

"You?" Hopper asked. "What the hell was that?!"

"You're sad," Caroline explained. "I wanted to know why."

"There's something called 'asking'," Hopper seethed. "How... what is that?"

Caroline swallowed the lump in her throat. "I didn't know it was going to hurt you," she whispered apologetically. She glanced down at her own hand. "I don't know why it did."

"You have some explaining to do, girl," he replied, and after a moment, he softened his voice. "I'm sorry. I'm tired. I'm confused as hell. I shouldn't take it on you."

Caroline shrugged. "It's fine. It's understandable."

"Is this a safe place?" he asked intrigued.

Caroline watched the house for a moment, closing her eyes and tilting her head slightly to the side. She moved her gaze back to Hopper before she nodded. "It's safe."

"Come on then," Hopper said, opening his door. Caroline slipped out of the vehicle, and waited for Hopper to take the lead before she followed him. He pulled out a key and with a gentle click, he pushed open the door. It was quiet except for the ticking of a clock somewhere in the trailer. Hopper switched on the light and the entire room was engulfed in an orangey glow of light; the open living, kitchen and dining room becoming visible to Caroline as Hopper motioned for her to enter.

Though it was small, furniture was scarce from the open plan room. A kitchen was made up of a microwave and a fridge, and the lack of a cooker was something she raised her eyebrows at. The dining table was covered in paperwork and boxes of unread information. Caroline observed a two-seater couch with one armchair and a coffee table making up the living area. What was startling to her though was the amount of empty beer bottles scattered across the surface of the coffee table as well as the surrounding area of the wooden table.

Hopper took his hat off, and moved quickly around the living area where he picked the bottles up. The sound of the glass bottles



clinking into each other caused her to close her eyes in pain, the sound reverberating throughout her mind. Hopper ushered an apology, noticing her move closer to the wall almost in fright.

Once he was done, he offered her a seat on the couch. She took it quietly and sat with her hands upon her lap. Hopper took the single armchair.

"I need to ask this..." Hopper began, after a moment of searching his mind for the right question. "Why... why do you look like how you did the last time I saw you?"

Caroline softly smirked. She observed his body language; the way he wrung his hands with anxiety spoke volumes. "There's a place where time doesn't change. I've spent a long time down there."

Confusion caused Hopper's brow to furrow. "I don't get it."

"It's a place that looks just like this," Caroline explained further. "They run tests on you before you go down there. They inject you with this thing... that, was so painful... your whole body is on fire, and you feel like you're dying. And part of you... wishes you did."

Anger flashed across his face and he moved his gaze away from her, but just for a moment.

Caroline cleared her throat. "I've spent so long down there that to be here, above ground, seems surreal."

"Down there? Where's down there?"

Caroline felt panic course through her veins, and she took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "It's called the Upside Down. It's just like this but it's not. No souls are down there. Just monsters," she fell silent. "They inject you with this *thing* that keeps you young so that you can fight them. Because time doesn't mean a thing down there, age doesn't either."

"Will you ever age?" Hopper found himself mentally cursing himself at a question he never believed her would ever ask.

"Yes," Caroline whispered. "Though it might be delayed. I have

monthly injections solely for that, to 'keep me fit and healthy enough to defeat them'. It must wear off but I'm guessing once it's out of my system that everything will go back to normal. Or at least I hope it will."

"I'm sorry," Hopper's voice was low.

"Sorry for what?"

"Not looking for you harder," Hopper replied. "You were right there, and I didn't know."

"It's not your fault, Hop," Caroline whispered. "You weren't to know. No one did."

"But still," Hopper responded quietly.

"I always wondered if I would ever see you again," Caroline said, her voice soft and sad. "And after a while, hope fades."

"Did you ever give up hope?" Hopper asked.

Caroline remained silent but shook her head. It wasn't entirely true, and Hopper knew that she was avoiding the truth within her heart. She had, and he understood that.

"Did you?" Caroline asked.

"I started to, yeah," Hopper replied honestly. Caroline nodded softly. "I wondered where you were. I thought that maybe you'd gone to New York to start your new life, and I hoped that if you did, that you were safe."

Caroline moved her gaze to the floor. She picked at the skin around her thumb anxiously. "I wouldn't have left so soon after... what happened."

Hopper nodded. "I know. That's why I never left this place."

They both allowed the silence of the room to speak for them. Hopper wanted to ask her questions, but he could tell that she was exhausted. It was getting late into the night, and even though the moment of her

being just there in front of him, he didn't want to leave this moment. He had dreamed about her many times before, and he was scared that as soon as he would open his eyes just a few short hours away that she would be gone again.

"I want to ask another question," Hopper began, his voice filling the silence. "This 'Upside Down'... why don't we know about it? What goes on down there?"

"It was a mistake," Caroline replied. "It's always been there, I guess. It's another dimension, which saying that out loud now, seems weird and crazy, and as if I'm making it up. But underneath us right now would be this exact trailer. The world is darker down there, and unspeakable things roam that world."

Hopper noticed the fear in Caroline's eyes. "What things?"

She scoffed and shook her head, wiping a tear that had fallen. "It roams this world. It takes people with it to feed on," she said before continuing. "And I was there to stop it from taking another daughter or son from a family."

Hopper stared at her for a moment, sadness clutching at his heart. He allowed her to have a moment where emotion and tiredness overwhelmed her in that moment. Caroline wiped the silent tears from her face, before looking up at him.

"My parents..." she began, her voice full of sadness and uncertainty. "Are they...?"

Hopper took a deep breath before he shook his head slowly. His eyes filled with tears as he saw her battle with her emotions, her lip quivering as she tried to process the information he gave her. He moved next to her and pulled her into his chest. She sobbed into his chest sorrowfully, her hands clutching at his uniform. He held her tightly, feeling the warmth of her tears upon his skin, and he rocked her gently into the night. Her howls of grief unheard of from the rest of Hawkins.

Once her cries fell silent and her body was heavier than what it had been, he slowly and carefully lifted her up into his arms. He carried

her down the small corridor and kicked open the door to the bedroom where he gently laid her down upon his bed.

He glanced at her for one last time before he placed a blanket over her still, sleeping form before he left the room, closing the door behind him. As he settled down on the couch, his bed for the last few nights, he thought about the years without her. And he believed her; everything she had told him was taken in as the truth and nothing but the truth. After finding out the information he did about MKULTRA, it seemed that everything she told him was regarding them. The tests, the drugs, the secrecy... it all made sense, strangely.

It felt surreal having her in front of him, to know that his eyes weren't deceiving him anymore, and that she truly was just a few inches away. As he allowed sleep to welcome him like an old friend, this time without the aid of alcohol, he understood that she needed him now more than ever.

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As she allowed sleep to slip out of her fingertips, the last remnants of unconsciousness falling through the gaps and plunging her back onto a conscious earth, she took a moment to appreciate the sounds of a new day surround her in those quiet moments. Caroline kept her eyes closed, fearful that if she opened them, she would be back in the Lab once more. She had always wondered what it would be like to no longer have the four white walls surround her at every twist and turn.

Birds tweeted just off to her right, the true volume of their songs dulled by the thickness of the window. She listened to them, her closed eyes becoming wet with tears as she tried to remember the last time she had heard birds around her. It had been a long time, too long in fact. She heard the distinct sound of a woodpecker, and as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, she allowed her mind to guide her to the exact location the sound was coming from. Just as she had reached it, a clatter of sound drew her back to the trailer she was in.

Caroline opened her eyes and sat up in bed. She looked around the room finding nothing but a bed, a bedside table and a wardrobe filling the room. She furrowed her brow at the sight. As the clattering continued, she pulled the blanket from her body and stood from the

bed. She carefully traipsed towards the door, where she pulled it ajar enough for her to see him in the kitchen. The distant sound of the radio filled her senses.

She moved out of the bedroom and stepped into the main area. The darkness of the corridor allowed her to watch him for a moment; and with the music filling the room around them, she observed him. She couldn't quite believe just how different he looked; he looked the same but there was the change that came with age. He was broader than he had been the last time she remembered, his hair was darker and messier, his facial hair had been all but missing, and his voice was deeper than she could remember it to be.

The creak of the floorboard gave her location away, and he met her gaze.

A smile etched across his face, almost beckoning her towards him. "I was just about to wake you," he began. "I made you breakfast. Waffles still your favourite?"

"No..." she said. "I hate them now."

"You're lying," he smirked at her. "After all this time, your nostrils still flare when you lie."

Caroline let out a small breathless laugh.

"They should be done soon," Hopper replied. "Took me ages to find the waffle iron so they better come out good."

"I'm sure they will," Caroline replied. "You always did make excellent waffles."

"Good," Hopper sighed. "Took me long enough to perfect them the way you liked them."

"See, you were always a good friend to me," Caroline responded warmly. "Does it feel strange that I'm back? It must've been weird."

"It doesn't feel strange," Hopper replied honestly. "I don't know. I guess I've always wondered about this day, and whether it would ever happen. And the fact it is makes me happy."

They smiled at each other for a moment. Caroline's smile faltered after a moment, and Hopper watched as she moved her gaze from him.

"I want to visit them..." Caroline whispered, her voice sad. "I want to say goodbye properly."

Hopper nodded, sadly. "Of course, I'll take you."

"Thank you," whispered Caroline, gratefully.

As he continued to cook her breakfast, she took a moment to look around at the trailer and the little knick-knacks he had around the place. There weren't many, and she could only guess the ones he did have on show meant the world to him. He watched her from where he was, his eyes narrowing as she hesitated over one memento of his.

A photograph of him, Sara and Diane.

He felt sadness pierce his heart as he remembered that day. They had been on vacation and had spent all day on the beach making sandcastles and running in and out of the sea. Sara's giggles had filled the entire beach. He remembered she hadn't wanted to go home, wanting nothing more than to stay on the beach until morning. He treasured it after she died, knowing that in that moment, they were all at their happiest.

He watched as Caroline's brows furrowed as she gently ran her thumb against the screen. A soft smile formed on her face, tears filling her eyes.

"That was my daughter, Sara," Hopper said, his croaky voice filling the trailer. "She... she died..."

Caroline glanced at him sadly. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You know, it doesn't get easier," Hopper replied. "They say time is a great healer, and it isn't. You just become numb and you don't feel anything else."

"It was her favourite memory of you all," Caroline said, her voice trailing off. "She doesn't want you to be sad anymore."

Hopper dropped the spatula onto the floor in shock. He found himself move closer towards her. "What?"

Caroline closed her eyes and moved her hand away from photograph, her hand in a loose fist. She breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly, allowing her hand to unravel with her breathing.

Hopper stumbled backwards as he saw the memory hazy in her palm. *Sara and him running towards the sea; Sara erupting in squeals as the cold water licked at her ankles; Hopper holding his daughter protectively over the waves; Diane watching on with love and adoration evident on her face.*

The memory flickered slightly. Caroline squeezed her eyes tighter and the images of his family becoming clearer and more vivid.

*Sara chasing Hopper along the beach; Hopper holding his wife and daughter tight as they watched the sunset; Sara begging for them to stay a little longer; Hopper wrapping his sleeping daughter up in a blanket and kissing her on the forehead*

The memory dissolved right before his eyes, and he watched as Caroline faltered afterwards. Her hand remained outstretched, but the memory having faded. Her face paled, and she moved towards the couch where she took a seat clumsily.

"How... What was that?" Hopper asked, his voice more abrupt than he had wanted it to be. "How can you do that?"

It took Caroline a moment to answer, gathering enough strength to speak. "She wanted me to show you that memory. To show you that though you can't see her, she's still here," Caroline said, her voice weak and with tears filling her eyes. "You just have look deep inside of your heart to remember the love you have for her, and replace the pain and anger you feel with that love."

When words all but failed him, Caroline continued. "You don't have to be angry with the world anymore. And you shouldn't be angry with yourself. She never wanted you to feel like that once she'd gone."

"Wait..." Hopper said, in disbelief. "How... is that possible? What... are you?"

Before Caroline could answer him with the darkest secrets of all, she moved her attention onto something else. She felt her energy be pulled elsewhere, and she stood, looking out of the window at something unknown. The sensation was overwhelming, and she closed her eyes to narrow it down. After a small moment, she breathed out.

"I have to go," she said lowly. "I have to be somewhere."

Hopper furrowed his brow at her. The confusion dissipated, and he found himself nodding. "Is everything okay? Do you need a lift?"

"Uh... no, I'll be fine," Caroline said, her mind elsewhere. Hopper watched as she became distant, her entire demeanour changing in an instant. It was only after a short moment that she turned to him with worry etched across her face, and her eyes almost pleading with his. "I need you to stay safe, okay? Promise me, you'll stay safe."

"Caro... what is going on?"

"All the questions you have, I'll answer them honestly," Caroline responded. "I'll come find you afterwards, okay?"

With a short nod from Hopper, Caroline stepped out of the trailer. Hopper followed behind her, feeling the coolness of the wind wrap around him.

"Wait," Hopper said, disappearing back into the trailer. He came back out carrying a jacket and passed it to her. "Here, take this."

Caroline thanked him and pulled it on. As Caroline walked away from Hopper and the trailer, Hopper watched as she disappeared into the distance. He entered his trailer again and closed the door.

He picked up the photo frame that contained the photograph of his daughter. He stared at the face of his young daughter, the still smile beaming at him. And for a long time, he didn't feel numb. He felt happiness, love and pride seep back into his heart.

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Caroline found her at the back of Benny's diner, huddled between the bins outside, knees pulled up to her chest.

Caroline had allowed her senses to guide her, slipping unnoticed from the sidewalk, as they became too overwhelming. As soon as she saw Eleven, she dropped to her knees and pulled her into a hug. Eleven tearfully wrapped her arms around her, holding onto her for dear life. Caroline whispered. "You're safe now, El. What happened?"

"Bad people," Eleven said after a moment. "Killed Benny. They knew. They found me."

"Who?"

After a moment, Eleven spoke, her voice child-like. "Papa."

Panic washed over Caroline. "Where are they now?" she asked.

"Gone," Eleven whispered, to which Caroline nodded. "Had to."

Caroline furrowed her brow in confusion. "Had to what?"

"They killed Benny," Eleven said, her voice low. "So, I killed them."

## 8. Part One: Chapter Seven

### CHAPTER SEVEN: WAYWARD BIRDS

Joyce Byers couldn't remember the last time she slept.

It had been five days since Will disappeared, and it was as though her life had stopped since the realisation of Will's missing presence around their home and Hawkins came to a head. Jonathan was trying to cope as best as he knew how, and she understood just how hard it was for him. He never moaned about their circumstances, only took it on the chin and shouldered a bit more responsibility so that she wouldn't be working her way into the grave. And it had been tough ever since Lonnie had decided one day that enough was enough and he couldn't bear to live a simple life any longer, especially the lack of a considerable income coming in and protecting them from the wolves at the door.

But he had gone, and it was something that they had to get used to.

Joyce had worried about how Will would cope with Lonnie leaving the family home, and though he was still young, she could only hope that it wouldn't cause their young son too much distress and pain. She always worried about him, and it was only natural for her to. He had been born sickly, and as a young child had suffered from bouts of illness more than other kids his age. And so, her protectiveness stemmed from worry.

It had only been recent that she had allowed him some independence of riding to and from school, as well as his friend's house. It was something he enjoyed, and he was appreciative towards his mother for allowing him to flourish in ways that he knew was hard for her to give up. But he was respectful in knowing that it was tough for her to let go of that responsibility, and he was always so careful when on the road that he would ring her at her workplace as soon as he got home just so she wouldn't worry about him as much as she did.

Her mind would race in the darkness, playing back all the hazy memories of that Sunday until her brain felt too tired. It had been a normal Sunday, one that she had been excited to have off. Her boss

had rung her early to cover Greg's shift after he had called in sick, and she had reluctantly agreed to work, knowing that the extra cash would come in handy with Christmas approaching. She had driven Will over to Mike's house for the day, as Jonathan was also working for a few hours that morning.

She had helped Will take his bike off the back of her vehicle, and had watched him with a heavy heart as he walked towards Mike's house. She had wanted nothing more than to spend the day with him, just spend it as mother and son, but it was tough being a single parent looking after two children. She wanted the best for her sons, and she needed to work in order to provide the best for them both. She had watched as Mike's mother opened the door and had waved at her, and she had stayed until Will disappeared inside and the door closed behind them. She had gotten back into her vehicle, not realising that would've been the last time she would see her son.

The five days had passed in a blur, and she had found that she was beginning to lose grip with reality. It was incredibly difficult to fathom that her son – brainy, smart and kind Will – was missing, and his face was plastered on missing flyers around the town of Hawkins. She couldn't comprehend just how much pain, anguish and worry she would have to endure.

And every waking moment was filled with panic at knowing her son was out there somewhere.

Hopper had reassured her that any new information he had been given would be to her straight away. He could see the worry embedded in her furrowed brow and tearful eyes, and he knew how scared she was at knowing she couldn't do much other than sit and wait. And he made sure that any little information he found or received was forwarded to her in a way that didn't seem as though all hope in finding him was fading.

And a part of her believed she wasn't doing enough. She couldn't sit by the phone any longer and wait for updates. Her son was out there somewhere, and she could only imagine how scared he was, and as his mother, she knew she needed to do something that would bring him home sooner. She knew that Hopper and his colleagues were doing their best, but she needed to help. As his mother, she knew.

She found herself walking the streets of Hawkins, handing out flyers to people passing her by. She pleaded with them, asking if they had seen him, or if they did see him to contact herself or Hopper straight away. She needed to feel like she was doing something in helping to find her son, and it was hard staying at home knowing that Hopper and the other officers were out there.

And she saw the looks they gave her; the look of doubt in their eyes, the uncertainty in their face. Children went missing all over the country and all over the world, and only a few returned home safe and well. And she hated it; the knowledge that not all children returned home to their families, and would either spend forever with their whereabouts unknown or found in places far from their home.

She entered stores and restaurants with a handful of flyers, and they stuck them in the windows and all around the establishment. Joyce found herself walking along the long stretch of road where Benny's Diner and a few convenience stores were situated.

And as she pushed open the door to Benny's Diner, she was overwhelmed with a scent so foreign to her that she found herself gagging at the devastating stench of a decaying body.

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*"Chief... you're needed down at Benny's Diner... it's urgent..."*

Hopper had learned not to ask questions when a call came through. He had watched as Caroline left abruptly, and had dressed for work, eating his breakfast as he adorned his uniform for another day at work. He had just gotten into his truck when the call had come through, and he had groaned inwardly at the fact that his type of work never seemed to stop. And that was part of why he joined the police force; the excitement of a never-ending job. The types of jobs he was called to varied, and he had enjoyed the fact that each job was different, and even though it was jobs that revolved around familiar faces, he didn't mind too much. They understood that his presence there would only be professionally and that his opinion of him was not his whole one.

As he set off on the road, his body instinctively heading over to Benny's Diner, he thought back to Caroline. Her ability... it was

something he couldn't quite comprehend nor fathom. He had never seen anything like it in his thirty-eight years. He had seen a lot of things in his line of work but that... was something else.

He thought back to the night before, the vision of his daughter in her hands, so pristine and complete, and he felt his heart swell with the knowledge that though his memory of that moment would begin to fade with age, Caroline had given him the ultimate gift. She had felt his pain and in such a way that he couldn't understand. He had seen the grief and pain in her eyes when she looked at him while he watched it transpire in her palm.

A life that she had not been a part of.

A life that he'd had after her.

There was no doubt that there was something about Caroline that he couldn't explain, and it was evident that she couldn't explain to him everything that had happened to her either. But something had, and he knew that Hawkins Lab was the reason why.

He couldn't shake the guilt in his heart at knowing that she had been so close, and that he had believed her to be so far away from Hawkins. Thinking about it now, he truly wished she had left Hawkins and had gone to New York, just so that she hadn't have had to experience everything that she had. It was almost unbearable to think about what she'd had to endure so much, and no one had been there to protect her or fight for her.

Her family had never been able to see her safe return home, and that had upset him the most.

The journey to Benny's diner didn't take too long, and he soon found himself pulling into the small parking lot. As the engine fell silent and he exited the vehicle, he saw the agonised faces of his colleagues. And he knew instantly that it was bad.

He closed the gap between him and them, and sorrowfully entered the establishment. The smell hit him instantly, and he took off his hat in respect. Benny's body was slumped on the ground, a bullet wound to the head. His eyes were open and staring at the ceiling, his mouth

ajar. A half-eaten burger was on the table next to his body.

"Chief..." Callahan called from the store room.

Hopper knelt beside his friend and closed his eyes for him. He rested a respectful hand upon the man's shoulder before he stood to his full height and followed the call from his friend. Callahan was stood in the doorway, next to the huge freezer. Hopper was startled as he saw two bodies near the back exit. Two men dressed in black suits with guns next to their still bodies, except on closer inspection, he found that the two men had not been shot.

"What the..." Callahan muttered.

Hopper moved closer, careful of his footing, and inspected the bodies with his gaze. Their eyes, nose and ears seeped blood, but there was entry and exit wounds that would suggest a bullet had killed them.

"This is strange..." Callahan muttered again, and Hopper threw a look at him.

"Who called it in?" Hopper asked, to which Callahan took out his notepad and scanned the information he'd scrawled on it.

"Joyce Byers," Callahan filled him in. "She's still here, I believe."

Hopper left the establishment quickly, his sights set on Joyce as she spoke with another officer. He nodded at the officer who got the hint and left them.

"You found him?" Hopper asked, to which Joyce nodded.

"Who could've done this to Benny?" she asked, her voice sad. "It's just... so out of character for Hawkins."

"It seems that Hawkins had buried a lot of secrets over the past few years and they're clawing their way back to the surface now," Hopper replied.

"What does that mean?" Joyce said, her brow furrowed in questioning.

"Doesn't matter," Hopper muttered. "So... you came here to..."

"Hand out flyers for my Will," Joyce said, filling in the blanks. "I thought it would help you guys out more if I did something to help. I can't sit there at home and do nothing. Someone might've seen my boy today. I'm sorry..."

"There's no need to be sorry," Hopper replied. "So, you walked in and?"

"I didn't see him, but I smelt it," Joyce replied. "Is he... is he dead?"

Hopper nodded, and Joyce looked away in remorse.

"Did you see anything out of character around the area at all?" Hopper asked.

"I did..." Joyce replied. "But I don't know if it was coincidental or..."

"What is it, Joyce?"

"It couldn't be her but..." Joyce began. "I thought I saw Caroline Browne... the girl who went missing all those years ago. But I might be seeing things. My brain hasn't been right since Will went missing."

"Caro?" Hopper asked.

"Yeah... she was with a young girl..." Joyce continued. "It mightn't have been her but... it probably wasn't."

"Go home, Joyce," Hopper said. "Get some sleep, okay?"

Joyce nodded soberly before she walked to her vehicle. As he watched her walk away, he knew that things were just not as what they first seemed. And he needed answers.

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Caroline had taken Eleven to the only place she knew to be truly safe. Hoppers Trailer came into view, and she felt instant relief at knowing that Eleven was as far away from trouble as she could be. She knew that Eleven was in danger; the very fact that she had been ambushed by Brenner and his guards had caused shockwaves to course through

Caroline's entire being at the realisation that they weren't truly off-grid.

Eleven had taken it in her stride and had done everything she needed to do in order to protect herself, and there had been nothing wrong with that. Caroline knew that she had killed the men in self-defence. And she would've done the same if she had been in her position.

"Where are we?" Eleven asked, her voice now calmer.

"We're at a safe place," Caroline replied.

"Safe..." Eleven responded mostly to herself.

As they trudged towards the trailer, Caroline searched for Hoppers police truck and finding it scarce from in front of his home. She didn't know how long he would be, but they would have to stay there until he returned. It only seemed right that she laid her trust in him; he had been accommodating to the change in her, the complete difference to the old Caroline he once knew. And she was different almost in every way, except it seemed as though not a day had passed in age. It was something she was finding difficult to comprehend, and though she only knew of little information regarding the reason why, it was still confusing to her at knowing that she hadn't essentially aged a day.

Hours passed them by and there was little conversation. Eleven had taken residence upon the steps and Caroline had spent most of the time pacing up and down. She had wanted nothing more than for her to hear the roaring of Hoppers engine travel down towards the trailer, and when she was met with nothing but silence, her worry only seemed to increase. She turned her attention onto Eleven who sat quietly on the steps; her arms wrapped around her legs as the cold weather rolled in. Her bare legs were covered in goosebumps, and Caroline shrugged off her jacket and handed it to her. Eleven stared at it for a moment before she nodded in thanks.

Eleven wrapped the jacket around her legs and the warmth from Caroline's body warmed her legs instantly.

Caroline noticed something in Eleven's pocket and furrowed her



brow. "What have you got there?"

Eleven pulled it from her pocket and inspected it before handing it to her. "Missing boy," she whispered. "Do you think... he's down there?"

Caroline moved closer to her and observed the photograph of the young boy. Dark hair, dark eyes, kind face, young...

A roar of an engine could be heard, and Caroline stepped in front of Eleven protectively. She watched as a truck closed the distance between them, and it was only when she squinted her eyes that she noticed that it was Hoppers truck. A sense of worry rushed down her spine as she watched his stern face rush towards her. He exited the vehicle and she knew instantly.

"You want the full truth?" Caroline began.

Before he could speak, she moved out of the way to reveal Eleven who had stood up and hid behind Caroline. Caroline wrapped her arm around the young girl.

"This is Eleven," Caroline said. "She's the reason I'm back."

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Joyce had returned home after Hoppers orders. Sleep hadn't been her friend for some time, and she knew she needed to rest her body and mind so that she would be better for when Will returned home to her and Jonathan. The house was silent when she entered, and with one quick search of the house, she reluctantly headed to bed. She knew that sleep was what she needed most, and it was only a matter of time before she started to become unhealthy. Her wellbeing – for Will – needed to be at how it used to be.

She knew Jonathan was working that evening, helping to bring extra money into the house while she looked for Will. And though her son was missing, he welcomed her as soon as her head hit the pillow. And as she dreamed of her son being where he should be, right there in her arms, she couldn't help but feel the hope in her heart begin to dwindle.

But one thing she was sure of: wayward birds always found their way

home.

## 9. Part One: Chapter Eight

### CHAPTER EIGHT: WITHOUT FEAR

In the wake of Will's disappearance, he left behind three best friends who spent every waking moment worried that he would never return.

The realisation of the missing piece in their group had been one that they couldn't get used to, and even though life had resumed quickly after his disappearance, it was as though the last moments of seeing Will in front of them would forever be burned in their mind. The nature of the game they played together had unnerved them, and they wondered if something untoward had happened on his journey.

Mike felt guilty with not inviting the boys to stay that evening. He knew that Will would've been safe at his house, especially knowing that sometimes his family worked late, and he would be alone for most of the evening and into the night. Lucas felt guilty at knowing that it was because he needed to be home by a certain time that had caused them all having to leave. Dustin felt guilty at knowing that he had been the one to see him last.

And even though each of them reassured the other, their words of comfort didn't seem to ease the overwhelming guilt. Their friend was missing, and all they could do was continue to keep their heads up at school whilst all eyes were upon them. The kids at school would turn their attention onto them, causing the hairs on the back of their necks to stand on edge at knowing that they were the last ones to see Will before he disappeared into the night. It was frustrating being so young and unhelpful; they only had limited information to give to Chief Hopper and even then, with the grunts coming from the only authority figure they were afraid of, it didn't seem good enough.

In the days that passed since Will was first reported as missing, the protectiveness of each parent within the small town of Hawkins amplified and snowballed. Every kid had to be home by a certain time, and if they were staying late at school that they were advised to call their parents and tell them.

As the days stretched by, the missing piece that was Will became

almost unbearable. As Dustin, Lucas and Mike sat in the latter's basement, the remnants of the board game they had played with Will the evening of his disappearance still upon the gaming table. It had remained untouched, almost as if they were too scared to move it just in case it was linked with Will. They all knew it was ridiculous, but they had never believed anything like this would ever happen and if they were going to be honest, they were terrified.

"I just don't get it," Dustin spoke first. They had been sat in silence for the majority of the evening after having returned to Mike's house after school. It was a comfortable silence mostly, with their minds going over the last time they'd seen Will. "We've done that route so many times... how can this time be any different?"

"It's strange," Lucas responded, his voice trailing off.

"I should've asked my mom if you could've stayed that night," Mike replied. "It's not fair that he's out there somewhere terrified out his mind, probably in the boot of someone's vehicle..."

"Or in a cave or basement," Dustin continued, to which Mike and Lucas glanced at him inquisitively. "What? My mom watches those shows, where people go missing and turn up years later."

"Your mom always watches weird shows," Lucas replied. "No... he couldn't have been taken..."

"There's no evidence to say that he wasn't," Dustin retorted. "I should've kept up with him... I shouldn't have let him go home alone."

The boys fell into silence, their minds racing. They missed him so much, that they often forgot that something bad had happened to him. They wondered where he could be, and if he was in danger. The police had kept tight lipped about his possible whereabouts, and even though they all knew the police were doing their utmost best to find him, it was difficult just knowing that something happened to him. Had he been kidnapped? Had he had an accident and he was lying in a ditch somewhere? Had he run away?

Every single question they had would remain unanswered, and there

would be no comfort brought as the hours would stretch into days and the days would stretch into weeks. All they could do was hope that Will was found before it was too late. They knew that Joyce and Jonathan wouldn't be able to sit at home and wait for the call to say that their son and brother had been found alive or dead. They knew him more than anyone, and they knew that this was totally out of character for Will. It was out of character for all of them.

"We should look for him," Mike said after a moment. "I can't think of him being out there alone."

"The police have searched for him and found nothing," Lucas explained.

"But they wouldn't know where he'd go," Mike replied. "Where we usually go. Where he could be."

"But he wouldn't be there," Dustin interjected. "It's been days since he went missing."

"And? If it was me, I'd hope you lot would be out looking for me," Mike retorted, his voice raised.

"That's true," Dustin replied sadly.

"Your parents know you're both here, so they don't have to know that we're out there," Mike replied. "As long as we're back home before nine."

"I don't know..." Dustin replied. "It just... it seems dangerous..."

"Will's out there!" Mike said. "Alone and scared. We have to do something. And if you won't do something then I'll go on my own."

Dustin and Lucas glanced at each other. "Okay... Let's go find Will."

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Hopper's chest heaved and his mind raced at the vision of the young girl trying to hide behind Caroline. He watched as Caroline reluctantly allowed her to escape from his view and be protected by her. His friend kept her eyes upon him, never wavering despite how intense his gaze was. She could see the frustration set heavy in his

brow, the sheer confusion flashing across his face. And she understood his stance completely; it was not simple, and just when he'd thought that had been the full truth, it wiped him off his feet once more.

"We can go," Caroline suggested, her voice low. "I warned you. The truth is never simple. But I wouldn't be *here* if I didn't trust you. And I do... I've never doubted you."

Hopper ran a hand through his hair and sighed in frustration. He kept silent and closed his eyes for a small moment, trying to compose himself.

"And it was wrong for me to bring this to your door and I'm sorry for that," Caroline continued. "We'll go. We've done enough damage."

Caroline made a move, her arm protectively wrapping around Eleven. Tears burned her eyes and worry burned her stomach. Hopper remained stood where he was, defeated.

"No," Hopper said lowly. He pulled out his keys and threw them at her. She caught them instinctively. "If you're both in danger then I have a right to know."

The trailer was engulfed in light as soon as they stepped inside. Caroline noticed that the beer bottles had been removed, their presence upon the floor no more. Relief washed over Caroline as she led the girl into the room. Though there were seats, neither one of them sat down. Hopper closed the door behind them and stayed by the door, knowing that he wasn't going to let them go without hearing the full truth. He had a right to know, and he knew that Caroline, at that moment in time, had been as honest as she could've been to him.

"He was my friend," Hopper began. "The guy found dead today. Benny... he was my friend. Do you know anything about that?"

His question and observation was mostly aimed towards Caroline. The tone of his voice had a hint of accusation intertwined with his question, and though Caroline hadn't picked up on it, Eleven had.

She stepped forward, head bowed. "Bad people. He protected me."

Hopper moved his attention to the young girl. "Bad people, huh? You were both seen leaving the scene of the crime."

"We... did... not... hurt... Benny..." Eleven whispered, her eyes growing intense and blood appearing at her nose. It took Caroline all but a moment to realise what Eleven had been doing, and from the groans and gasps for air emitting from Hopper as he was being strangled by an invisible force.

"Stop!" Caroline called out, moving towards Hopper. Eleven ignored Caroline's order and continued to choke the air out of the tall man. "He's not bad. Eleven!"

Caroline came to stand in front of Eleven and, with a raised hand, caused the young girl to weaken her power. The difference in age had a significant change in the powers that both had. And while both were powerful in every single way, the truth was evident. And though it wasn't spoken, it was understood by them all. Eleven, having been so young when she was taken, had powers too incredible to even fathom; she had been trained around her own capability and it had come naturally to her. And Caroline – a stark contrast – had been taken at her prime age, where ageing could be ultimately stopped, and she had been trained to protect, guide and ultimately defeat the monsters that hid in the shadows.

As Eleven weakened under Caroline's overwhelming power, the young girl fell to the ground in a heap. She moved herself to the wall, legs to chest, her eyes intensely staring back at Caroline. Hopper gasped for breath behind her, and she moved her attention to the older guy.

"You're going to be fine," Caroline whispered. "Keep breathing."

As Hopper recovered under her watchful and protective gaze, he placed his hand upon his heaving chest and struggled to catch his breath.

"She's like you..." he gasped.

Caroline shook her head. "No... she's nothing like me. She's strong. She's powerful. At this age that I'm at now, I will never be as strong as she can be when she's my age."

Hopper's eyes widened in alert. "Are you her protector?"

"Something like that," Caroline said, before moving over towards the young girl. She knelt in front of her, her entire body language different, comforting. "He's my friend. I can't let you hurt him, okay?"

After a moment, Eleven nodded. Caroline stood and reached a hand out for her. Eleven took it and Caroline pulled her up to her full height and moved her over to the seating area. Hopper had recovered fully and was sat in the single armchair, his shirt buttons undone at the top. Once they were all sat down and the atmosphere was calm, Hopper continued with the question he'd asked before.

"Who were the bad people who came for you?" he asked, and after a moment, he turned to Caroline. "Are they the same ones after you?"

Caroline took a deep breath. "We're both from Hawkins Lab."

Eleven looked over at Caroline in shock, worry etched across her face. Caroline offered her a reassuring smile.

"It's okay, I trust him," Caroline responded. She glanced over at Hopper. "She was born with abilities that know no bounds. She has limited vocabulary, but her powers can kill any man."

"How old are you?" Hopper asked.

Eleven shrugged and turned to Caroline who answered for her. "She's twelve."

"Do they do this a lot? Take young kids and teenagers and test on them?" Hopper asked, a hint of accusation in his voice.

"Yes," Caroline answered. "They've been doing it for so many years, and it's always been covered up. It was a different time back then when I was taken."

Hopper closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly hit with memories.



"They had people watching me for an entire year before they took me," Caroline explained. "I found files upon files of me, of you, of my family. Every little thing we did, grades I got in school, if I'd turned to lesson on time. And I knew that my 'disappearance' had been covered up. They planted things all over the country to try and sway people away from the truth."

"They do that a lot, don't they?" Hopper said, his gaze lifting to Caroline. "Why?"

"They opened a portal to a world so different than here, but it's the same," Caroline whispered. "It's dark. It's horrible. It's the stuff of nightmares. The other dimension I told you about? They found it in the fifties. But I wasn't the first teenager to go missing in Hawkins. There are so many of us; some whose whereabouts will never be found and some who never made it out."

"How did you get out?"

"I learned their routine," Caroline replied. "I observed them for years. Asked enough questions without being too 'nosey'. Their motives may be wrong, but we have been trained to defeat those monsters that lay beneath us."

"Are you sticking up for them?" Hopper asked, to which Caroline shook her head.

"No," Caroline replied. "Why would you say that?"

"You were here one day and then gone the next," Hopper said, his voice harsh and sad. "We had to go through hell every single day wondering if you were alive or if you were dead. It's been twenty years of just pain and confusion."

Caroline faltered at the moment and bowed her head.

"So... this whole 'their motives may be wrong but...' bullshit doesn't make this pain go away. It doesn't make this whole situation right again. Your parents died not knowing what happened to you. Your parents died not knowing you were going to come back," Hopper said, angrily. His anger was mostly with what happened to her, and

though Caroline knew it, it still hurt her to know just how much pain had been brought to her family and friends who had been left behind.

"I know, and I apologise for what they did," Caroline whispered sadly. "It can never make it right, but I can start trying to make it right. I have so much anger in my heart for what they did, but it's mostly for the pain they caused everyone else who had live not knowing the full story."

Hopper stood and moved away from them though he didn't go far. He sat at the breakfast bar and covered his head with his hands. Caroline and Eleven remained silent, knowing that he needed to vent his frustrations. After a moment, though, he stood and moved towards a table where he yanked the drawer open. He pulled out a black and white photograph. He handed it to Caroline who took it cautiously, and he watched as her eyes focused on the image.

Two beaming teenagers smiled back at her with smiles that reached their eyes. There was no denying how happy they both looked, and it only caused the ache inside her chest to worsen.

"You see it?" Hopper asked. "There should've been more photographs of us; prom, graduation; engagement; wedding..."

"Stop," Caroline said weakly.

"It's been a death sentence for us," Hopper said, his voice raised. "We had to live without you for so goddamn long."

"Don't shout at her," Eleven muttered standing up in front of Caroline.

"Hey, kid," Hopper began. "You have no ide-"

Before he could finish his sentence, she had raised her hand up and, with all her strength, threw him across the room. His heavy body crashed into the wall that shuddered by the force that it was hit with. His body slumped against the door frame, his eyes closed, blood seeping from the wound to his head. Caroline jumped from her seat and rushed over to him. She slid across the floor on her knees as she raced to his side, her eyes wide with shock.

"Eleven... what have you done?" Caroline asked, her voice trembling

with panic.

"I... protect..." Eleven muttered.

Caroline stood and moved towards Eleven carefully. "He was upset... that was all..."

"But his voice..." Eleven whispered. "Papa."

"He's not like Papa," Caroline reassured. "He wouldn't hurt us like Papa would."

Eleven observed the still man for a moment. Panic washed over her, and flight or fight kicked in, and before Caroline could reach for her, she ran out of the door and down the steps, as far away from the trailer as she could. Caroline had run after her, but the young girl had slipped into the darkness, allowing it to swallow her up.

Caroline threw a look up at the night sky and gave one last look out at the surrounding fields before she slipped back into the trailer to tend to an unconscious Hopper. As she knelt beside him and saw the wound to his head, his closed eyes and mouth ajar, she thought of all the times she had wanted to be back with him and all the times she was unable to get back to him. And now he needed more than anything, she wasn't going anywhere.

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"We should check Castle Byers," Dustin suggested. "What if he got injured and went there?"

"Would the police have checked it though?" Lucas asked.

"Nobody knows about it," Mike replied. "No one but us would know about it."

As they rushed through the night, their feet pounding hard against the forest floor, their minds raced at the possibility of finding Will. The days that had passed them by were hard, and all they wanted was their friend to come home. Wherever he was didn't matter as long as he came home.

Castle Byers came into view and they found their footing begin to

slow.

"Stop," Mike called out and his friends came to a stop. "Look..."

They cast their gaze upon the darkened area, and it took them all a moment for their vision to clear of the shadow monsters and focus on what Mike had called for them to look at. Castle Byers had always been a place for them to go when things at home became too stressful and they needed some place to go. They had all used it from time to time, and it had served them well. As they observed the fort before them, panic rattled at their chest.

As they stepped closer to it, they were able to see shoes poking out of the entrance of the fort made with wood. A twig broke underneath Dustin's foot and they all stopped, their gaze moving towards him. He apologised with a scrunched-up face. As they glanced back to the fort, they were shocked to see the feet and shoes had disappeared.

"Will?" Mike called out, using the opportunity to not further startle whoever was hiding. "Is that you?"

When his question was only met with silence, he stepped closer despite his friends shaking their heads at him and trying to stop him. When they realised that he wasn't going to back down or run away, they moved with him.

The sheet that acted as the door to Castle Byers had been rolled down. Mike took a deep breath as they all readied themselves for an attack, and he lifted the material upwards. The inside of the fort was dark and so he crouched, taking the light coming from the torch attached to his head, it was then that they all saw it.

A girl was huddled inside, her knees to her chest, blood seeping from her nose. She was bald, and dressed in a tattered and dirty dress. As the intrusive light beamed in her face, she turned to them and stared into the light, the cold coursing through her body with a shiver.

## 10. Part One: Chapter Nine

### CHAPTER NINE: DOVES AND RAVENS

*Hopper anxiously waited outside the door, a bunch of flowers clasped tightly in one hand and the other hand hovering above the door handle. He didn't realise just how nervous he would, the fear in his heart that overwhelmed him with every step he took up the staircase. Her parents had ushered him up, reassuring smiles on their faces as they sensed his nerves reverberate throughout his entire body and almost cause his heart to break free through his rib cage and chest. He knew it wasn't physically possible for that to happen, but he felt as though his heart was going to give out.*

*It reminded him of when he first heard the news. The crash had been an unexpected one; her vehicle had skidded on ice and had ended up in a ditch. Caroline had been trapped for some time before they had gone out themselves to look for her, worry setting in when she was late for curfew. The injuries that she had sustained had caused panic to rush through all those that knew her.*

*A broken leg. A shattered ankle. Multiple open wounds to the length of her body where glass from her window that had shattered glass around her. A deep jagged scar to her hand.*

*As most of her time had been spent in the hospital and now her own bed, she couldn't help but be harsh towards her injuries. She berated her injuries, knowing that full well if she had taken the longer route home, she wouldn't be sat there, stuck in bed with nothing to do. And as her friend stood outside the door, she had no idea just how much seeing him would mean to her. It had been a week since she had gotten out of hospital, and all guests had been given strict instructions to allow her a week to acclimatise to her new situation. Hopper had rung the Browne family phone every single morning asking if he would be able to come over and see her, and it was such a relief when he was given the go ahead.*

*The accident had worried him. He had said goodbye to her that evening and had offered her a lift home, but it had been the rare occasion that her father was enjoying a vacation from work and so had given her the use of the family vehicle. She had relished the idea of having it in her possession*

for the entire week; no more waiting on the school bus, nor relying on Hopper to go out of his way and give her a lift. She felt independent, and so free. And just when she had thought she was being cautious and as careful as her father would've expected her to be, she found the vehicle spinning out of control and hurtling towards a ditch.

It had been a scary moment where she truly believed her life was over. And all the faces of her loved ones flashed before her very eyes. Her parents, her aunts and uncles, her cousins, Hop...

Knocks sounded at the door. Knock, knock... knock... knock, knock. She closed her eyes in relief at hearing the familiar and secret knock they both shared. She wanted to run to him, to throw open the door and wrap her arms around him tightly and thank him for being such an important part in her life. But she found that any small movement she made was pure agony and she grunted in pain.

"Come in..." she said, her voice tight and pained. The door opened slowly, and she beamed at him as soon as he opened the door fully, his entire body filling the door frame. "Hop! I'm so happy that you're here!"

Hopper beamed back at her and moved towards the bed where he awkwardly handed her the bouquet of flowers. She grabbed them with her injured hand and winced in pain.

"I keep forgetting!" she squealed. "Ouch!"

"Here," Hopper said, grabbing them from her and laying them down upon her bedside table. "They're dying anyway so what's another while without water, huh?"

Caroline smirked at his comment and tried to focus on something else other than the pain in her hand. "How have you been?"

"The injured girl is asking me how I am?" Hopper smirked also. "It's been a tough couple of days, you know? Got a B in mathematics, tripped down the stairs... it's been awful."

"Stop," Caroline chuckled. "It hurts to laugh!"

"I bet," Hopper replied, worry etching across his face as he took in her injuries. "To say you've never broken a bone or gotten hurt before, you've

*done great job at catching up with us all!"*

*Caroline smirked, trying to hold the laughter inside. She closed her eyes as she focused on trying to digest the laughter fighting its way out. She knew that if she let the laugh out, that she would hurt herself. Hopper smirked at her as he knew what she was doing.*

*"You know, I come around here out of the goodness of my heart, and you have the audacity to not laugh at my jokes and fall asleep," Hopper said with humour in his voice. "I could've just stayed home and told jokes to my drunk sleeping father."*

*"You are such a..." Caroline began.*

*"... a handsome guy," Hopper finished. "I am, aren't I? It's the growth spurt, isn't it?"*

*Caroline laughed, and immediately winced as the pain coursed through her body.*

*"Sorry! I'll stop," Hopper whispered, the worry still causing his brow to furrow.*

*"So, what's new at school?" Caroline asked, intrigued with any new gossip. "I feel like I'm missing out!"*

*"You're not missing anything at all," Hopper replied. "Oh wait... Lonnie asked Joyce out. She said yes. That's about it."*

*"Really?" Caroline gasped. "I didn't think Lonnie was her type!"*

*"Neither did she," Hopper chuckled. "What is with girls and bad guys?"*

*"It's all the rage now," Caroline smirked. "I might get myself a bad boy."*

*A flash of jealousy flashed across Hopper's face for a moment but was replaced with worry as she adjusted her position, wincing as the pain was unbearable. He reached for her, helping her as much as he could, allowing her to use his strong forearms as balance. Seeing her in such a way worried him; she had always been careful, and maybe it had been a lack of concentration on her part, but things could've been so different. And that scared him most. The thought of never seeing her face again terrified*

him to his very core; the thought of never hearing her laugh again upset him more than he would ever admit to her.

She was staring out of the window, her heart longing to be outside again. He focused his attention upon her and he couldn't help but take in the new features that adorned her body. The marks to her face, the cuts and bruises that looked painful to touch. The bandaged wrist and hand that she kept close to her body. One leg had been wrapped in plaster, and the other was tucked underneath her. It was only when she felt the burn of his gaze on her that she turned to him, tears threatening to fall.

"You're still here, sweet," whispered Hopper, his voice low and reassuring.

"It hurts everywhere," she whispered.

"But you'll get better," Hopper reassured. "It will take time but you're the strongest girl I know, Caro."

She unwrapped her bandaged hand and he allowed his gaze to fall upon her injury. A large jagged wound was embedded in the smooth curve of her palm. He took her hand in his carefully, his eyes grazing across the wound.

"It's ugly..." Caroline whispered breathlessly. "I'm so stupid."

He saw the pain in her face, the frustration and anger and he knew. Suddenly, he stood from his seat and rested her hand upon the comfort of her blankets. As he moved away, she tried to push herself off the bed but struggled to follow him.

He threw a look behind him as he heard her call after him. He smirked. "You can't chase me," he called behind him. "So, don't even try it. I know what you're like."

As he saw his reflection in the mirror, he knew it was the right thing to do. He saw the pain and anguish in her face at the realisation of the injuries she had sustained would forever be carved in the path of her life. He grabbed the scissors from the cabinet and opened them, taking the sharp blade in his hand and dug into the tough skin of his palm. He groaned in pain as a burning sensation overwhelmed his senses as the blade tore through his skin, and causing blood to seep to the surface and trickle



*down the length of his hand and forearm.*

*He grabbed the towel hung up on the rack, and wrapped it round his hand tightly. As he slipped out of the bathroom, her eyes immediately clapped upon his make shift bandaged hand. Blood soaked through the crisp towel.*

*"What have you done, Hop?"*

*"Now you can't look at yours and think yours is ugly," Hopper said, a hint of discomfort in his voice. "Because I'll be offended and sad that you'd think mine is as well."*

*"You're crazy," Caroline breathed, tears burning her eyes.*

*"The best people are, Caro," he whispered, coming to sit beside her on the bed. "It's a mad world out there..."*

The memory was snatched from him harshly as consciousness came back to him. He jolted awake, his eyes blearily looking around at his surroundings. He attempted to sit up, but his entire body felt as though it had been weighed down with bricks. He was laid in bed, sweat forming on his brow, an overwhelming thudding to his head that worsened with each blink. He groaned in agony.

A hand was laid upon his shoulder, and his vision cleared. Caroline was beside him and was stopping him from moving too quickly. She didn't want him to over-do it, knowing that he was unstable.

"Lay back," she ordered.

"Where am I?" Hopper groaned in response.

"You're in your room," Caroline answered. As Hopper blinked a few times, he found himself being physically planted in his bedroom. All sense of reality had seemed to have jumped ship and abandoned him at the first sign of trouble. The last thing he remembered was being in the living room with Caroline and Eleven - a girl he had only just been introduced to - and then nothing as the darkness claimed him.

"How... how did you get me in here?" Hopper asked, intrigued. He knew he wasn't the easiest person to move around with his stature. "Should I even be asking?"

"I have ways," Caroline's voice moved around him. It was only after a moment that he felt her presence beside him, where her hand laid upon his hand. "Here, drink this..."

"What is it?"

"Water," Caroline responded.

"Get me a beer," he muttered, sitting up as much as he could.

"Yeah, that isn't going to happen," she threw back. He nodded and allowed his lips to rest against the cold glass. Caroline tilted it for him, and he felt the wetness on his lips.

"What happened?" he asked once he'd had enough water.

"El... she's protective," Caroline began explaining.

"You don't say," Hopper groaned, his hand clumsily reaching up to his head. He pressed down on the sore point, winced as his fingers encountered the open wound to his forehead.

"It wasn't sunshine and rainbows there," Caroline began, taking a seat upon the dining chair she'd brought in. She had taken refuge in the bedroom, her worry increasing as the hours stretched on and Hopper was still hadn't regained consciousness. Hopper saw the seriousness in her face and sat up fully in bed, his back resting against the wooden bed frame. "We were tortured, told that if we didn't do something that our families and friends would pay the price. Some didn't know their families, and had been born within the lab. Some were taken, like myself, and forced to live confined in rooms with a bed, a chair and a table. They would watch as we slept, recording brain activity and our impulses."

"How many of you are there?" Hopper asked, swallowing the anger he felt burning in his throat.

Caroline scoffed. "There were hundreds, if not thousands of us."

Hopper widened his eyes in pure shock.

"We were all protective of each other, even though we hadn't seen

each other before. We knew of each other's existence from the screams we'd hear in the night or when they came for us," Caroline continued, her gaze falling to her hands where she picked the skin around her thumb. "We knew what we all had to go through, the pain we had to endure every single day, and you build a bond with the blurred faces you'd see being pulled out of their rooms and dragged down the corridors to the testing rooms."

"I'm so sorry..." Hopper said lowly. "For what they did to you and everyone else there."

Caroline shrugged in response, unsure of what to say. It had been done, and nothing she did now would ever change that. She didn't want to dwell on the past, for what had been done to them all, for that wouldn't change a thing.

"I'm sorry that they hurt you," Hopper continued.

"So am I," Caroline whispered after a moment. "I couldn't save them all. I couldn't leave El behind."

It was only when Hopper was pondering over Caroline's response that he understood what she truly meant. They had caused so much damage to so many people; had made them do things they would never forget; and had threatened them in every sense. And he knew the dangers she had put herself in by doing such a noble act of ensuring she had gotten out with Eleven. There were people after her, and they were hot on their heels.

He didn't realise, as he watched Caroline talk more about the abuse they had endured, just how close they were.

## 11. Part One: Chapter Ten

Author's Note: Here's the next instalment for this story! Hope you enjoy! All reviews are welcome and appreciated!

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### CHAPTER TEN: SHELTER

The Upside Down had claimed another life that night.

As Nancy and Steve made love to each other, Barbara Holland had been outside waiting by the pool for her friend. The cut to her hand was something she was concerned about, but not enough to leave her friend behind with a guy who she wasn't sure about. She needed to make sure her friend was okay – she knew guys like Steve, wanting nothing more than to be popular and befriending idiots along the way. And though Nancy had told her to go home without her, Barb remained outside just like any friend would have. As she swished her feet in the pool, the warm water coating her feet, she had thought about the little argument they'd had. It was a small one, but it was a quarrel that both would forget about in the morning. It hurt Barb to think that she wasn't cool enough to be accepted in Steve Harrington's group of friends that Nancy had been accepted in without a hitch.

She had tried to take her mind off it, knowing that the more she paid attention to it, the more upset she would become. She knew Nancy was going through a dilemma of wanting to be popular but still wanting to be friends with her. She wasn't mad with Nancy; how could she be? And so, she found shelter outside and waited for her friend. She wasn't going to leave her friend behind; she would never do that.

But it had all happened so quickly that even she couldn't truly comprehend the course of events. Blood from her cut finger had dripped into the pool; a shriek sounded behind her; and then nothing but darkness.

And though she had no clue as to where she was, the Upside Down welcomed her like an old friend.

She had woken sometime later, her consciousness regaining for just a short time. It was dark and with a scent so putrid that she felt as though the contents of her stomach were about to resurface. The sounds unnerved her more than anything, unsettling her to her very core. As she stared around at her surroundings, she found that she was in the pool in Steve's back garden, except not all was what it seemed. It was different, strange, and opposite to everything she had known...

A shriek echoed around her and she snapped her eyes open fully. It was there again. The sky was dark, a fog hung heavily above her, and spore-like particles floated around her. She covered her mouth quickly, the scent causing her to feel nauseous.

Her head throbbed with a cruel headache. Her fingers were being bitten by the cold. Her entire body shook, and she wasn't sure if it was the cold or how petrified she was.

She turned backwards and her eyes landed on Steve's house and she narrowed her eyes as she realised that so much was different to the world she was so used to. No lights were coming from the house, and all signs of life seemed to be non-existent which only caused her to panic even more.

Where was she? How had she gotten there? What was this place? Questions seemed to battle with each other in her mind as confusion began to set in.

When another shriek sounded around her, this time much closer, she realised she had to try and escape whatever this place was. She was petrified, and all she wanted to do was to run back home. But with the shiver that ran down her spine, she knew deep down that she would have to find shelter and protect herself as much as she could.

"Nancy?" she called out. "Nancy, where are you?"

When nothing but silence responded to her, she stared tearfully at the dark house.

She stood from her fallen position and climbed out of the swimming pool, and with one last glance at the house and where Nancy was –

she had to be in there surely – she ran as fast as she could. Her entire body ached, and her mind tried to process her new surroundings.

But it seemed as though no matter which direction she turned, the monster was there. They crept out of the shadows and advanced towards her quickly, closing the gap before she could comprehend the true distance between them. As she navigated herself through the woods, she was aware of even more *things* coming out from behind the lone trees, and it was then that she truly and utterly felt hopeless.

She kept running though, and hoped that she would come to a clearing soon. She knew she was running out of choices and time.

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*Scared. Alone. Frantic.*

*Her feet pounded against the ground of the Upside Down quickly, and the sound of her heartbeat reverberated around her. Her breath was hitching as she quickened her pace, the distance between her and them increasing, and her lungs burning profusely. Panic washed over her and overwhelmed her like an old friend.*

*There was no way out. No matter where she turned, her only surroundings were the stretched woodland with lone trees planted around her. A shriek came from behind her and as a shudder coursed down her spine, she knew that it was much closer than it had been before, and a little too close for comfort.*

*But what she hadn't seen was the shadow move around her, and as she turned, hoping that she would escape from its watchful gaze, her entire body collided with it. She fell to the ground, her chest heaving, and stared up at what she had struck.*

*Shock consumed her as she noticed just how gargantuan it was. And as a scream was about to escape her, it struck her and consumed her. And everything that she was and had been was no more.*

Caroline woke with a jolt.

As her eyes darted around the room for a potential threat, her chest heaved with panic. The bed that Hopper had been in was empty, and

as she stared down at herself, she noticed a blanket had been placed on her. She had fallen asleep in the chair, and the darkness outside was becoming lighter as the hours stretched into early morning. She pulled the blanket off her body, and stood clumsily due to lethargy and stumbled out of the bedroom.

The corridor was dark, and she squinted into the darkness. And though it was far from what she had experienced just below ground, there was still a rattle in her chest as her heart began to beat furiously. She became breathless, panic striking her in that moment. She found herself being pulled to the wall, through panic more than anything, and she felt the sturdiness of the wall against the curve of her back and she laid her hands outstretched against the wall.

Caroline tried to control her breathing. Her mind whirled and her breathing was erratic. Images of a world she tried so hard to forget flashed in front of her eyes and like a snake striking her, she slid down the wall.

"Caro?" A voice called for her, but she stayed on the floor, reeling. It was only when the voice was close to her that she looked up at where it was coming from. He was beside her, having raced over to her when she had slid down the wall and her mind somewhere that wasn't there, and was staring intensely at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked panicked, to which she looked over at him, but her eyes weren't seeing him properly. Her brain was betraying her, and she struggled to keep him still.

"They..." she began, her voice trailing off. "They got her..."

"Who? Who's got who?"

"A girl..." Caroline started. "Taken... Upside Down..."

Hopper faltered at that. He left her side for just a moment and returned with a notebook and pen. "Tell me everything..."

"She's young," Caroline said. "She's sixteen..."

Worry flashed across his face as he remembered a similar case. The girl who had gone missing all those years ago had been just two years

older, and was sat in front of him now with abilities that he couldn't truly fathom.

"Do you know who it is?" he urged, and she closed her eyes.

As he stared at her, he saw the worry on her face. She furrowed her brow as she allowed her mind to lead her below ground and to the world she had tried so hard to forget. She navigated her way through the empty world, the sound of screeches in the distance but only she could hear them. Her heart began to race but she pushed through the initial panic, knowing that she needed her mind and body to be clear if she was going to try and find out who it was who had been taken, and why.

She knew there was never a rational explanation as to why people were being taken all over Hawkins by the monsters who hid in the shadows. But she felt it. Her connection with the Upside Down was something that she never truly understood but it was relentless and overwhelming, and she felt it all: the anxiety, the panic, and the pain of the lives that were claimed.

She felt for the energy, the last streaks of life in the air. As her mind stumbled upon the heap of bones, she felt a shiver run down her back.

And it was then that she saw it. The gruesomeness, the horror, the disregard for human life. Bodies upon bodies welcomed her, and it was a sight she had seen often. And though she often walked among them, she was nothing like them.

They were monsters who did terrible things to innocent people.

She came to a body lying there on the ground in front of her. She was young; fair-skinned though she now had a deathly shade to her; and still.

"B... Barb... Barbara..." she stuttered. "Barbara Holland."

Hopper widened his eyes in shock. She was a student at the local high school; straight A's, future so bright, oozed smartness. "Is she okay?"



Caroline was silent for a moment before she shook her head. Her voice was sad and quiet. "It's too late."

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Barbara Holland had been a straight A student with the hopes of becoming a nurse. Her ability to care for people was a huge inspiration to everyone who knew her. She exuded kindness and was a true friend to everyone who was lucky enough to be in her social circle. Her family and friends would spend three weeks searching for her, not realising that she was in her favourite place; the library. And when she would be brought home for a burial she deserved, those who cared about her would realise just how much she truly meant to them.

And what would hurt the most for her family was the fact that her future was robbed from her.

She would never finish high school and graduate. She would never get to travel the world. She would never become the nurse she always hoped and dreamed to be, or thrive in her job. She would never become a wife, or a mother, and would never be able to see the children that would've been grow up and become their own people.

Barb was a caring, considerate and kind individual who had been deserving of a bright future. And though her life was cut short, those who knew and loved her would live on with her in their hearts.

## 12. Part One: Chapter Eleven

### CHAPTER ELEVEN: A PLACE CALLED HOME

"I'm going to take you some place," Hopper said a few hours later. Caroline had taken comfort in his bedroom, her back against the wall and legs held tightly to her chest. Hopper had let her seek comfort in a quiet place, knowing that the situation was too close to home than he or Caroline had first expected. He had known Barbara Holland by name, having been friends with her father throughout school. It was a tough situation to comprehend that he had spent the hours alone thinking about how he was going to break the news to her parents, though he knew it wasn't a wise thing to do. Not now.

He knew he needed to bide his time, gather more information about the underground world beneath him. Caroline knew the place like the back of her hand, and though he wanted to ask her questions about it, he didn't want to cause anymore discomfort.

Caroline looked up at him, her face sad and eyes narrowed. The silence that filled the room was enough for him to continue.

"There's a missing boy," Hopper continued. "Will Byers. He's Joyce's youngest."

"Joyce..." Caroline repeated her name, her mind creating the last image she could remember of her. Dark brown hair, brown eyes, kind smile, caring nature, friendly. "Joyce and Lonnie..."

"Yeah," Hopper nodded. "That Joyce. Her son... he went missing a few days ago..."

"Eleven... she had a missing person's flyer," Caroline explained to Hopper. "A boy... young..."

Hopper furrowed his brow and nodded. "Would you meet Joyce with me? And to just see if maybe... he was taken by the same things that took Barbara? I know it's a stretch, but I can't seem to shake that thought. If he wasn't taken by something then he was taken by someone."

"I can try," Caroline nodded, noticing the worry in his voice.

"We'll head over now," Hopper stated to which Caroline stood. He moved past her and retrieved a jacket from his closet and handed it to her. "Here, take this."

She took it and put it on, her body immediately being swallowed up by excess material. She let out a chuckle as she noticed a smirk form on Hopper's face. After a moment, it faded from his face and she wondered if it had been there at all. His eyes were intense, staring straight into her own eyes. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and she took a deep breath, calming herself.

"You're really here," Hopper whispered, confusion still causing his brows to knit together.

"I'm really here," Caroline whispered, nodding softly.

"What they did to you there... I'm going to make them pay," Hopper promised. Caroline saw the emotions fighting their way onto his face, though he didn't allow any of them to overwhelm him.

"They will get what they deserve," Caroline whispered, and Hopper furrowed his brow at that but made no comment.

The journey to Joyce's house was a quiet one. As Hopper drove down the endless roads, he was aware that Caroline watched in awe as the buildings, houses and trees passed by the window. A soft smile formed on his lips as she noticed new houses built on what used to be open land. So much had changed in Hawkins since she had been taken, and it was only now just how much by her reactions. She remembered the bowling alley they would go to which had now been closed and laid dormant. He noticed a frown upon her face at that.

"That rematch I promised you," Hopper commented causing Caroline to glance over at him. "It's still open..."

Caroline smirked and nodded. "If I recall... you lost? And I won?"

"Alright, don't rub it in," Hopper chuckled softly. "There's a bowling alley in the next town. I'll take you one evening."

"That sounds... really nice," Caroline smiled and turned away, her gaze fixed on the trees that passed them by in a blur. She felt tears sting her eyes as she thought back to the night she was taken; she felt as though her life had ended that night, and though it hadn't, she couldn't help but feel robbed at the fact that twenty years had passed and so much had changed. Her parents were gone, her childhood home belonged to another family, and Hopper had experienced pain and heartache like no other.

The journey to Joyce Byers house continued in silence. Caroline watched as Hopper pulled up in front of the one-storey house. They remained in the truck for a few moments as Hopper sensed apprehension radiating from Caroline. Hopper raised his gaze to the house just in time to see the curtain lift and fall and the door open after a moment. Joyce came into view and he turned to Caroline.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice soft and comforting. She moved her attention to him and nodded.

They exited the vehicle and made their way towards Joyce, who looked as though she had seen a ghost. Her gaze was fixed on Caroline and Hopper could feel the uneasiness emit from Caroline.

"Come on in," Joyce said after a moment, opening the door for them both to enter her house. As soon as they were all inside, Hopper motioned for Joyce to follow him into the kitchen for a quick word, leaving Caroline alone in the living room.

As Hopper spoke with Joyce in the kitchen, Caroline looked around at the living room. Wooden walls surrounded her, a dull cream carpet cushioned her feet beneath her, wooden furnishings filled the room. She heard their voices loud and clear despite their hushed tones; the questions Joyce was asking Hopper were the ones she expected her to ask him, panicked and confused. She knew it was hard to comprehend her being back in Hawkins after twenty years of being missing and declared dead; but the one thing that seemed most startling was the fact that she hadn't aged a day. There had been a reason for that, one that took most people a lot of time to truly understand and it had even taken her a while to grasp onto her reality.

"Are you sure she can find Will?" Joyce's small voice filled her mind.

"She's going to try," Hopper whispered. "She's not the same Caroline we both knew back then. She's different."

"Different how?" Joyce asked, panic grasping at her heart.

"Just watch," Hopper said, turning towards Caroline. He watched her for a moment as she stared at the alphabet painted upon the wallpapered wall with fairy lights strung up. She turned to look at the framed photographs nailed to the wall; the faces of Joyce and her son's staring back at her. Her eyes fell on the young boy and she furrowed her brow.

Caroline turned to Hopper then, and though her eyes only rested on him for a moment, he felt it. She moved her gaze to Joyce and took a breath.

"Will... when was he last seen?"

Joyce moved into the room then, and came to stand in front of Caroline. It was strange standing in front of her old classmate and friend when she looked the same way as she had done the last time she had seen her. She understood Hopper's warning about Caroline, but it still was something she was finding hard to process properly.

"It would five days ago now," Joyce began. "He was round at his friend Mike's house at three-one-seven Circle Drive, I think."

Caroline faltered at that. Hopper saw her falter, and stepped towards her. Her mind swirled and Hopper caught her before she could stumble backwards.

"Hey... look at me," Hopper whispered to Caroline and noticed that it took her a while for her vision to focus on him. "What are you thinking?"

"He was at my house... it used to be my house," Caroline tried to explain but her mind was racing too much for her to grasp onto any thoughts. "That's a coincidence, right? It has to be..."

"It's a coincidence, but it doesn't mean anything," Hopper responded.

Caroline closed her eyes for a moment before reopening them with a deep breath. She moved away from Hopper then and turned to Joyce.

"Have you got anything of Will's that I can look at?" Caroline asked. "It might help."

Joyce exited the living room for a short moment before returning with a childhood toy that belonged to Will. "He always slept with it at night," she whispered. "It was the only thing that would comfort him after a nightmare."

Caroline nodded and held the soft teddy bear in her hands. She closed her eyes and gathered the energy around her. She breathed in deeply a few times, mostly to calm her nerves and navigate through the tunnels in her mind. She felt their gazes upon her, but she focused on the memories, fears and secrets woven into the stitch work of the toy. She heard the voice of a young boy at different stages of life, from a young child to the age he was the last time he held the teddy.

It took all but a few moments for her to make contact. He was standing in a dark room, the floor mirrored like water. He was standing there, staring at her and his eyes never wavering from her. He was talking but his voice couldn't reach her.

"Have you had communication with him before?" Caroline opened her eyes and spoke to Joyce who nodded much to the surprise of Hopper. "I can see him and he's talking, but I can't hear him. Talk to him."

"Will? Where are you?" Joyce's voice faltered then and she turned to the fairy lights upon the wall. When nothing happened, she turned back to Caroline.

Caroline moved her hand away from the toy and placed it outstretched in front of her, and she allowed herself to create the image she was seeing in her mind. Dark room. A mirrored floor that resembled water. Will standing there, lost.

Joyce cried out in shock at the image of her boy standing in front of her. Will was trying to talk but his voice was still unheard, the words

he was trying to communicate with them remaining unknown.

"I... I need you to use my energy, Will," Caroline whispered. "I know the monsters are there, and you're afraid just in case they hear you. But I promise you, I will protect you from them."

"Mom?" Will's voice filled the room after a moment. It was echoed, distorted, but it was there.

"Will!" Joyce exclaimed. "Where are you? How can I find you?"

*"I don't know where I am," Will replied. "It's like home... but it's not..."*

"I'm going to come find you, okay?! I'm going to bring you home," Joyce promised, her voice failing her.

*"They're coming," Will cried out. "I'm scared, mom."*

"We're going to find you," Joyce promised again.

Hopper glanced at Caroline then, picking up the exact information she had told him about the Upside Down. He noticed that the veins in her face were showing, that her eyes had darkened, and her nose was bleeding. She was growing weaker and weaker as she protected Will from being heard by the monsters that surrounded him.

A screech could be heard in the distance. Will turned at the sound and his eyes opened wide with panic. He turned back and looked at Caroline.

"Where are you now?" Caroline ordered, her voice raised.

*"I'm here," Will responded. "I'm underneath you."*

"I'm coming for you, okay?" Caroline said. "If they come for you... hide. I will find you."

Will nodded at her and turned back at the approaching sound. *"Please hurry."*

The screeches grew in volume and they watched as Will vanished before their very eyes. Caroline faltered as the monster came into

view; an old friend entering the mind gateway, oblivious to those watching it as it stalked its prey.

As Joyce began to scream in fear, Caroline closed the gateway quickly before it could catch onto its audience. As soon as the image was erased from in front of them, Caroline stumbled backwards. Hopper rushed towards her, and guided her to the armchair. He noticed how weak her body had become, and he knew the questions he had would have to wait.

"I don't... I don't feel good..." Caroline whispered before her eyes rolled to the back of her head and the darkness claimed her once more.



## 13. Part One: Chapter Twelve

### CHAPTER TWELVE: LITTLE WORLDS

Their hunt for Will had turned up with an unexpected surprise, and Mike didn't know what he was going to do if his mom found the young girl in their basement. He had taken her back to his house and offered her a safe haven for the night. He didn't know what she was doing out so late, and in such torrential rain, but he knew he needed to offer her some support. He had Dustin and Lucas slip her into the back of the house, away from the watchful gaze of his mother as he kept up appearances with his family for a couple minutes.

He slipped down into the basement shortly after to find the three of them standing with his two best friends staring at the girl. And it was then that he took in every little detail of her: the shaved head, the fearful eyes, the pink dress and trainers. As he stared at her in disbelief, he noticed the way she was looking at them all like a deer in headlights.

Dustin and Lucas looked over at Mike as they wondered what their next plan was. They had many questions floating around their heads: Who was she? What was she doing in Castle Byers in the rain? Where had she come from? She didn't go to their school, and they hadn't seen her around Hawkins before. She looked to be around their age which was something that made Mike question everything.

"Who are you?" Mike asked, his voice bold and questioning.

The girl hesitated for a moment before licking her dry lips. "Eleven."

"What kinda name is that?" Lucas asked, his voice harsh. Eleven flicked her gaze over to him and furrowed her brow. She didn't know much about humour, and she wondered if he was making fun of her name. She thought back to where she had been before; the trailer that belonged to the Chief seemed a distant memory.

Eleven lifted her jacket sleeve and showed them the inked number tattooed into her skin, and as the three boys stepped closer with a gasp as they inspected it, she knew there would be more questions

than she could answer.

"How did... how did you get that?" Dustin asked first.

"Are you both really believing this?" Lucas was next.

"Eleven isn't your name, is it?" Mike asked, his voice softer. She looked at him then and shook her head.

"I don't have a name," Eleven whispered sadly.

"You must have a name," Mike replied reassuringly.

"I can't remember it," Eleven offered, and it was all she had. For as long as she could remember, Papa had referred to her as Eleven and she had truly believed it to be her name. She didn't know anything else, and she wondered if everything that Papa had told her was a lie.

"Okay, Eleven," Mike whispered, raising his hands as he stepped closer to her. "Why were you in Castle Byers?"

"Run..." Eleven said quickly.

"Run?" Dustin asked, his voice cautious. "Have you run away from home?"

Eleven shook her head. "I... Caroline..."

"Who's Caroline?" Mike asked with a furrowed brow.

"She lived here..."

Mike threw a confused look over at Lucas and Dustin who were equally as confused as he was. He turned back to Eleven.

"Wait... Caroline... she's the girl who went missing years ago?" Mike asked, as he tried to piece together information he'd heard and seen. Eleven nodded at his question. "How do you know her name?"

"She was with me," Eleven answered.

"Where?"

Eleven swallowed the lump in her throat and thought for a moment before answering. "In the Upside Down."

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Caroline woke with a jolt sometime later. As her vision focused in on her surroundings, she recognised that she was still at Joyce's house. She reached her hand up to her head as she slid up the couch so that she was sitting up. The movement was heard by Hopper who slid into the room from the kitchen, his worried gaze fixed on her. He had removed his jacket which now hung upon the coat rack behind the door.

"Hey Caro..." Hopper whispered, as she moved her gaze onto him slowly. "You had us worried there. How are you feeling?"

Caroline didn't answer him, but rather moved to stand. Hopper noticed the unsteadiness in her movements, the clumsiness in her limbs, and just before she fell to the ground, he caught her arms with his strong hands.

"How long have I been out?" she asked after a moment, and it was then that she saw Hopper glance over at Joyce who appeared from around the corner.

"About an hour," Joyce glanced at her watch. Caroline studied her for a moment before nodding in appreciation.

"I have to go," Caroline said, releasing herself from Hopper. He reached for her then, his protective side coming to the surface.

"You're not going anywhere," Hopper ordered. "You made contact with Will, and we saw that monster. I don't what the hell that was. And you passed out. There's no way in hell I'm letting you just go out there in that state."

"Just let me go, Jim," Caroline ordered.

"What's gotten into you?" Hopper seethed, his eyes burning.

"Please, just... just step aside," Caroline pleaded with him. She could feel panic begin to rise in her chest, and she knew she needed to keep

calm.

Hopper asked. "Or what?"

Caroline stared at him with determination. "Jim... I'm going to tell you one more time. Step aside, please."

"Do you really think we're going to let you just leave after you passed out?" Hopper asked, dumbfoundedly.

"Don't you see? Can't you add it all up?" Caroline shouted, her voice shaking with emotion. "The day I left the Lab was the day Will was taken. He's gone because I left with Eleven."

"It's not your fault," Hopper reassured, but furrowed his brows at Caroline who simply rolled eyes.

"Hopper, please..." Caroline whispered, her voice weak.

"If you're going then we're going to," Hopper stated, his voice soft and eyes dark. "We're not letting you go alone."

Caroline shook her head. "It's too dangerous. There are things down there that you will wish you never even knew about."

"Hopper's right," Joyce interjected. "My boy is down there. I can't have you go alone."

Caroline turned to observe the woman. Her eyes were exhausted from worry and lack of sleep. Her body hunched over in anguish. She wondered if her own mother looked that way when she went missing. Caroline closed her eyes for a moment, trying to conjure an image of her mother in her mind. It was difficult but like paint on a canvas, her mother's image began to take shape in her mind. Dark brown hair, bright green eyes, a soft smile, glasses framing her round face. She missed her more than anything in the world, and there was nothing she could do to bring her back. Her parents died not knowing where their daughter was, and never knowing she would turn up out of the blue after so many years.

It stung. And Caroline felt bitterness towards Brenner. She knew he'd be out looking for them with the rest of the guards, and it was only a

matter of time before he stumbled upon them. Hawkins was a small town, after all. A place where no one could hide.

"I need you to promise me one thing before we go there," Caroline began. Joyce and Hopper watched her carefully. "If anyone sees us, let me handle it, okay?"

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"This Caroline... why was she taken to the Lab?" Dustin asked as they followed the trail towards Hopper's trailer, a route being led by Eleven as she used her mind to navigate her way back.

Eleven stopped and shrugged at his question. "I don't know. She took me away."

"How long were you there for?" Mike asked, concerned.

"I can't remember," Eleven answered honestly. "It's all I remember."

As Eleven turned back around and continued leading the way, she was unaware of the concerned glances being shared between the three best friends.

"What did they do there?" Lucas piped up.

"Tests," Eleven answered quickly.

"Like mathematics?"

"What's mathematics?" Eleven asked innocently.

"I wish I didn't know what it was," Dustin smirked. "You're lucky."

Mike hit him then and shook his head. "What he's trying to say is that... we look like we're all the same age and it's strange for us to understand just how different we are from you."

"Different, how?" Eleven inquired after a moment.

"I... we... you were brought up in a Lab," Mike stuttered, trying his best to not make it sound rude. Eleven simply stared back at him and

blinked a few times.

"You have family?" El asked to which they all nodded. "Family... I have Papa."

Lucas asked. "Who's Papa?"

"Papa," Eleven repeated. "My Papa. He looks after me. He makes me do brain tests."

Lucas narrowed his gaze at her and questioned her. "Why?"

His question was left unanswered as they reached the trailer in Eleven's memories. She stretched her senses inside and found no heartbeats, and sighed.

"She's not here," she whispered.

"Where could she be?" Dustin asked, but it seemed his question would be left unanswered as Eleven collapsed to the ground in sheer agony as pain ripped through her entire body. She grabbed her head in discomfort as a loud screeching ricocheted throughout her mind. Her nose began to bleed, and her breathing hitched in her throat. The boys rushed over to her in panic, and they watched as her eyes flashed black. It was for just a small moment, but it was enough for them all to realise the severity of the situation.

"El?" Mike called out to her. She glanced at him in pain. "What's happening?"

"She's gone back home."

..

The Lab was quiet which was a stark contrast to the way she left the building a few days before. Though the alarms still flashed red along the corridors, the sirens were silenced. All signs of life were gone from the building which she deemed would benefit her more than she realised. Hopper and Joyce had joined her, not wanting her to go alone. Joyce wanted to be there for her son when they found him, and Hopper wanted to support all of them. He was worried about Caroline and her behaviour when she was at Joyce's house, and it

was something he knew he had to discuss with her at another time.

As they descended down the stairs into the main Laboratory, Caroline ordered for them to equip themselves with the appropriate attire to protect them from the spores. Hopper had handed Caroline one, but she dismissed him silently with the shake of her head.

"I don't need one," Caroline whispered. "I've been down here with less."

Hopper furrowed his brow at her comment but before he could ask her about it, she reached the gateway. As they adorned the suits, they followed behind Caroline as she unlocked the door to the portal. A cart was waiting for them, and Hopper stepped onto it first, and turned back to help the two of them onto it. He couldn't take his eyes off Caroline; exposed and unprotected from the spores that surrounded them as soon as they descended further down into the Upside Down.

As the cart reached the bottom, they stepped off it. The screeches surrounded them then, and Caroline closed her eyes, gathering strength as she felt the fear radiate from Hopper and Joyce behind her.

She didn't know what was to await them, but she was ready.

And the Upside Down welcomed her home.

## 14. Part One: Chapter Thirteen

Author's Note: So it's been over a year since I last updated this story, and I cannot apologise enough! Life kinda got in the way! But with the new season - which, so far, is incredible - I just had to write! I had so much planned for this story and I'm so excited to continue writing this story. Please enjoy!

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### CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DANGER ZONE

For a long time, Hawkins had been her home.

It had been the place her parents had moved to in their first few months of being an engaged couple; they had established a home together, providing themselves with the best start in their future together; they had conceived her in their first home; and they had brought her home from the hospital when she was a mere one day old thus allowing her the best start in life. Her home had been her haven, a fortress for her imagination, where she thrived in every aspect of her life.

Hawkins had also been the place she met Jim Hopper. A tall, chubby boisterous six-year-old who bounded towards her in the school playground like an excited puppy. Their parents had known each other through work and they had been introduced to each other a few times in passing but never long enough for them to play together and get to know.

The first few days of school had been a rough toll on Caroline. She was shy, naïve and introverted, and Hopper had been there by her side to guide her to the right path and keeping her company when it all became too much for her. She would venture towards the quiet place that quickly became her own; a peaceful corner in the classroom where she would lose herself in the stories she always carried with her. It wasn't long before Hopper found her, and the space had become their own.

Hawkins had grown with her as she became a teenager, and it wasn't long before she felt like she had outgrown Hawkins. Her need to



leave the place had been overwhelming knowing that the longer she stayed, the more she resented it. But on the other hand, she loved the place with every inch of her being, but she knew she needed to fly the nest.

But there was one person who would cause her departure from the small town to be more difficult and painful than she ever imagined.

Jim Hopper.

And in a cruel twist of fate, Hawkins had been ripped from her grasp along with Hopper. And she was thrown into an environment that had been so different to the one she was used to. When she was supposed to start her life with Hopper, she was tortured, prodded and tested upon by strangers who tattooed a number on her wrist and referred to her as that. Her whole identity was stripped, and she soon found that she was losing herself as each day stretched by and no one came for her.

The Upside Down had quickly become her domain. And she would navigate her way through the underground realm to find a way out, returning to the places she knew like the back of her hand, trying desperately for anyone to hear her, for Hopper or her parents to hear her voice.

But her voice fell on deaf ears, except *they* could hear her. And she would run for her life.

And so, she learned to stay quiet. Staying quiet meant staying safe. She quickly adapted to life in the Upside Down which had been difficult for her to comprehend for the Upside Down had been nothing like home, yet it reminded her so much of it. The contrast of what she remembered home to be was staring her right in the face; it was quiet, still, and instead of life thriving in the streets, the monsters would creep in the shadows and sneak out of the darkness, taunting and hunting her.

She learned to gain their trust over time. It had been hard, and she endured a lot of torture trying to adjust into their world. Her main aim according to Brenner was to act like a trojan horse and destroy them from the inside, all the while paving a way for future

generations to gain knowledge of the life in the Upside Down and acting as guardians for the future test subjects.

She was the guinea pig in the experiment. The first one to walk in the Upside Down and bring them information and an insight of the life very much like their own to Hawkins Laboratory.

Caroline had escaped the Upside Down and now she was venturing deeper into a place that had been her home. The spores filled the air around her like snow on a cold, dark morning and as Hopper and Joyce struggled against the change in air despite their suits adorning their bodies and protecting them against the spores.

Time was different in the Upside Down. Each day felt as though a year had passed, and maybe it had, but it was something that Caroline was used to. The relentless darkness that suffocated her was palpable, her entire being masked by the darkness that surrounded her.

"Keep an eye on things around you," Caroline turned towards them, warning them both. "They can be sneaky with newbies."

"What are they?" Joyce asked, her voice shaking with fear.

Caroline was silent with Joyce's question falling on deaf ears. The mother of two could only watch Caroline through her mask, her eyes straining as the spores floated around them. Her gaze fell on Hopper as he watched Caroline intensely, struggling to see through the thickness of the spores. It was surreal to them how Caroline seemed unaffected by the harsh spores, and how reality began to set in for Hopper at the knowledge of what Caroline had to endure.

"I need you to follow me closely," Caroline instructed. "Keep close."

As they ventured further into the Upside Down, Caroline simply raised her hand up to move the thick vines out of the way. They responded to her command, allowing them to continue down the route. Hopper took the rear and watched as the vines reacted to Caroline's presence; as if whispering their delight at the mere sight of her. An unsettled feeling washed over him.

Caroline came to a stop; her eyes scanning the surrounding area for a clue. Joyce continued forward a little, stepping over the thick vine-like branches that lined the ground around them, as he came to stand beside Caroline. Her eyes were closed, but her mind was travelling through the Upside Down; a place she knew like the back of her hand. For Hopper to watch her was difficult; to him, she simply had her eyes closed, but she was searching for Will. His scent and heartbeat were distinctive, but the Upside Down was loud with her return, causing her some difficulty to truly track him down.

She ran her tongue along her lip, moving her head involuntarily as she weaved her way through the area that spanned the whole town of Hawkins.

"Where are you..." she said to herself. "Show me..."

As soon as the words, softly spoken and calming, left her mouth, she collapsed onto the ground in pain. She grabbed her head, as if clawing the agony away. Her entire being felt as though it had been set alight, burning a flame so bright that the tendrils reacted as if they had been scolded.

"Caro... what's happening?" Hopper knelt beside her; his eyes wide with concern. He watched as her eyes opened and was taken aback with the eyes that met his; unfamiliar and cold.

Caroline blinked a few times, her eyes—black, like ink—stared back at him. "It knows I'm back."

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Eleven watched as the boys tried to process what she had just told him. She wiped her nose, the blood staining the back of her hand. Her mind was racing as she tried to tap into Caroline's emotions, but she was too far away, the Upside Down causing a barrier to build between them. She was defiant though, pushing harder to try and knock down that wall, but it was as if it knew she was trying to find her.

"I have to go down there," Eleven whispered, her voice low. She tried to process the emotions she was feeling in that moment; a rush of sadness and fear crashed against her chest like waves crashing

against the side of a cliff. She felt her mind become numb despite the amount of thoughts rushing around inside; a constant roar of doubt and hopelessness.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Eleven looked at him then, her eyes sad. "She won't be able to return here if I don't help her."

"What do you mean?" Dustin asked this time.

"It will kill her if she tries to leave."

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Caroline pursued the sound of Will's faint heartbeat despite the toll the Upside Down was having on her body. Her legs were heavy, her balance weak and her head dizzy and on fire. She had seen how Hopper had reacted to her, and she knew it was happening; the transition that she had fought so hard to stop. Caroline had tried to ignore the effects it was having on her body, but it knew she had returned home, and it was doing everything in its power to keep her there. But she had two innocent people with her, and she was trying to find the others; Barb and Will. She knew she couldn't succumb to him, she had to fight in order to keep the others out of danger.

As long as she was breathing, they would be safe from him.

"Caro—" Jim's voice sounded, causing her to come to a stop. She turned, avoiding his gaze, knowing the darkness was still in her eyes. "Is this him?"

She simply nodded, and then she spoke. "I need you to keep following behind me, okay?"

"Look at me," Hopper told her, noticing that she was doing her utmost best to not look in his direction. "Caro, please..."

Caroline let out an anguished sigh before she lifted her blackened eyes to him. He stared sadly back at her, his nostrils flaring as he tried to keep his composure as calm as possible.

"Don't let him win," Hopper whispered defiantly. "You're stronger

than him, okay? *Don't let him win.*"

Caroline nodded, her lip trembling. She wanted to believe him but the weight of him on her back was too much, overwhelming in every sense.

Her attention, in that second, was taken away from them and onto the heartbeat that seemed to beckon her from afar. "This way," she said, moving the tendrils away with her mind. "Will..."

They came to a wall, mucus-like in texture and alive in every sense of the word. It moved as if it were lungs breathing. Hopper and Joyce stared in shock at the sight of it, as Caroline watched with sadness as she saw the true extent behind it. Inside were missing children and teenagers; wayward kids who ran away from home, or those who had gotten lost on their way home from school, and who all had been claimed by him like she had been. As her eyes settled on the young boy in her visions; a familiar face who knew her only by her voice was covered by the mucus substance, a tube feeding his tiny body.

Will Byers had been taken on his way home from his friend's house one evening. As she stared at his body, a figure even his mother didn't recognise then, she allowed him to speak to her, to show her how he had come to being down there.

*It was an unusually quiet night in Hawkins when he disappeared.*

*He had been riding home from his friend Mike's house on a late Sunday evening when he had heard it. It had been behind him as soon as he had left his friend Dustin at his house along the way. He kept his feet moving, his bike pedalling away as fast as he physically could from the overwhelming darkness. Panic had washed over him, and he understood that he needed to get away from it – whatever it was.*

But he didn't make it away. It wasn't that he wasn't fast enough or smart enough—

No, it was never that.

Caroline closed her eyes, the darkness piercing her soul, just as Joyce's gaze fell on her son. A guttural sob escaped her, causing the

Upside Down to shudder and vibrate in response.

## 15. Part One: Chapter Fourteen

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN: OUTNUMBERED

*The sky was dappled with clouds of various shapes and sizes. Between darkening clouds that promised rain was the hope of summer that was clinging on for dear life, a battle between forces of nature that would always result in the dampening of the world beneath them. The heat of the summer had been gloriously overwhelming; the days were as hot as the nights, with no comfort nor respite from the rays that beamed down on them.*

*Caroline often found herself walking to Hopper's trailer before the sun truly hit the town of Hawkins, relishing in the delightful breezes that swept through her white cotton dresses and through her curled hair. She would watch him from afar, walking up the dirt track in her white sneakers, as he worked on his truck out front, a cigarette hanging from his lips.*

*She would creep up on him and try and scare him, but her attempts would always fall flat. It never stopped her though, even when Hopper would notice her walking up to the house, he would always pretend he hadn't seen her or he would scare her in return.*

*There was a poignant moment for Caroline as she laid on the roof of Jim Hopper's beat up truck that day. She listened as he hummed a tune he'd heard on the radio; a catchy, soulful and romantic one. She wore red sunglasses and chewed bubble gum as the scent of cigarette smoke and engine fuel filled her senses, its intensity growing stronger in the heat. But she didn't mind it at all; she enjoyed the scent more than any other girl she knew.*

*"What would you do if the world ended tomorrow?"*

*It wasn't the usual question she would ask, but it was one that was still as accepted as any others she would ask him in moments of peace. He pondered for a moment, his eyes narrowing against the fumes and sunlight. He wiped his sweaty brow.*

*"Other than trying my best to prevent it in a superhero kinda way..." Hopper began with a hum and a smirk. "In all honesty? I would spend it*

here. With you. Working on my banged-up truck and still fretting about my future which wouldn't really matter in the grand scheme of things but still fretting. What about you?"

Caroline moved so that she was laying on her stomach and lifted her sunglasses. Hopper put the hood down a little so that he could see her. She bit her lip and met his gaze. "I'd spend it here with you too."

"No, you wouldn't. You're only saying that because I said it, and you're trying to not hurt my feelings!" Hopper smirked, causing Caroline to burst into laughter.

"No! I honestly would," Caroline said as soon as her laughter settled. "I can't think of a better way to spend my last day on earth. Sure, I'd hope my mom and dad were there but... you're pretty good company, Hops."

"Summer's nearly over," Hopper said, his voice and demeanour growing sombre. The atmosphere stilled, as if holding its breath as she allowed her gaze to drop to the ground beside her. The grass was turning brown, the heat of the long summer days having sucked the ground dry of any moisture.

"We only have one more year of school. Do you know what you're thinking of doing after?"

Hopper shrugged. "Probably fix cars like my dad. Have you?"

As she shook her head no, she had told her first lie to him. She had thought about her next steps once school was done and dusted; and she had hoped to leave Hawkins behind her and venture to New York City where a whole new world was waiting for her. People she would meet were walking around and getting on with their lives, unaware that in less than a year, she would be a part of their life. She felt her heart drop as she observed Hopper waiting for her to voice her answer. "No. I haven't even thought about it—it's just... too much to think about now."

Hopper nodded slowly, his eyes searching hers. "You're a smart girl, Miss Browne. The world is your oyster. Don't let that hope rot here in Hawkins."

She simply nodded and watched as Hopper returned to fixing his car, and



*she returned to lie on her back with the both of them not realising that in less than a year, Caroline Browne would go missing and everything they had would fade into memories.*

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Joyce Byers had been given a bad hand of cards for most of her life.

Her marriage had failed, and her husband had moved in with his much younger girlfriend. The home that she had created for her family had crumbled into disrepair. She worked a dead-end job where she wasn't respected in her role, but it was what put food on the table and a roof—albeit sometimes leaky—over their heads. But one thing she was sure of... she was one hell of a mother.

She clawed at the mucus substance covering her son, but no matter how hard she tried to rescue her son from it, it simply forged together once more, resisting her attack. Hopper joined her, hoping that his added strength would help her.

"Stop..." a voice came from behind them.

They continued their attempt of rescuing Will with Caroline's warning still hanging in the air.

"He's my son! I can't just let him stay in there!"

"It's the one thing keeping him alive right now," Caroline told them, which caused their hands to come to a stop. "You remove him from that, he *will* die."

Joyce panted. "How do you know that?"

Hopper understood as he watched Caroline stare at a figure in the mucus wall. Barbara Holland was situated beside Will; her disappearance having been believed to be a runaway, had been down there all along. Her face looked different to that of Will's; more sunken and drained of all life. Her eyes were open, but blank and unseeing, the light having left them a long time ago. Joyce quietened as she took in the scene before her, a mother's love being the most powerful thing.

"We can't leave her behind," Caroline told them in a whisper. "Her

parents should have the right to bury their daughter."

Hopper and Joyce nodded in unison. Hopper observed Caroline from the corner of his eye, noticing how she couldn't take her eyes off Barb. *That was me*, he could hear to say in her mind. Where she had survived and kept as a guardian, Barb had been tossed aside as though she was nothing, with the monster taking everything from her in the blink of an eye. Caroline closed the gap between her and Barb and reached her hand into the substance that surrounded Barb, pulling the tendril that was feeding from her. It reacted in her hand, as if burning under her touch. Barb slid down from the restraints holding her up, her body weak and lifeless.

Caroline pulled her out and laid her on the ground. Barbara Holland, young and smart, was now a shell of the girl she once was. Caroline closed her eyes as she laid a hand upon her damp head. And with her mind, she projected Barb's last moments for them all to see.

*"If you're going to be like that then... I can't be your friend, Nancy," Barb whispered, her voice breaking with betrayal. "We're only here because Steve invited you. He didn't invite me."*

*Nancy stood in the hallway and looked sadly at her friend. She bit her lip and removed her gaze from her one and only friend who truly cared about her and allowed her heart to stone. "Then maybe you should go. I don't need you here. I thought I would invite you because you'd just be sat at home, lonely and doing homework. I need fun friends, Barb."*

*"And I'm not fun?"*

*Nancy shook her head, lifting her gaze, and shattering her friend's heart in the process. "No. We only became friends because our moms are friends. But... it's time for a change. I want these people to like me. And they can't like me or think I'm fun if I'm always making sure that you're okay."*

*Barb nodded and walked past Nancy. As she opened the back door, her heart broke even more when she realised that Nancy hadn't said anything to stop her from leaving and had stumbled upstairs instead.*

*She found the pool and sat on the edge of it, her feet dangling in the water. The light from Steve's bedroom showed two people, and she knew*

*Nancy was with him. She would stay, she decided in that moment. She would stay just in case Nancy needed her.*

*She had cut herself and she had pressed down on it quickly. She had let out a curse her mother would have been mad if she had heard it, but she had thought she'd been okay. A loud rumble could be heard, and she had looked out at the woods that surrounded Steve's parents house.*

*But—it had all happened so fast.*

*Something grabbed at her foot and she didn't have time to take a breath before she was pulled under, and then—*

*Bright flashing lights filled her entire world in that moment and she fought against whoever and whatever had taken her, but it was too strong, too powerful, that even with all the strength she had within her meant nothing. She saw the person she would grow up to be – a schoolteacher, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and then—*

*Darkness.*

*Just darkness.*

*And she had known that her life had been snatched away from her then, everything that she had been and everything she was yet to be was gone...*

Caroline moved her hand away from Barb's head but remained by her side. Silence and grief spoke for them in that moment as none of them knew what to say. What could they say? Hopper cursed under his breath, the guilt of being the chief of police in the town and believing she had simply runaway was hard for him to comprehend; his duty to serve and protect had failed Barb. Joyce found herself moving to the other side of Barb, tearfully reaching for the young girl's hand.

Caroline moved her hand to the young girl's head once more but didn't show it this time. She needed to know how to conserve life when she removed the tentacle from Will without causing him irrecoverable damage. She saved them the heartache of watching just how brutal it was. When she was done, she met Hopper's gaze.

A whole lifetime had passed them by, and their future together had been snatched by the very monsters that had claimed Barb's life and

was doing the same to Will.

"I need you to take her with you," Caroline pleaded after a moment.

"With us," Hopper corrected with a furrowed brow. He knew from how she looked at him that this was a goodbye.

"She's right," a male voice filled the space around them causing Hopper to turn around and Caroline to stand up. She moved to be in front of her friend, protecting him from the man who tested on her for years and had taken her life away.

Brenner had once been a man with good intentions but who had lost them along the way. He had a hope for the world, where monsters could be guarded by those powerful enough to take on the job. Some were born with it, and some were given the gifts in the hopes that they would be just as powerful. Caroline had been his first test subject; a young girl who he and his team had been watching for the first year of their work in Hawkins. She exuded kindness and happiness radiated from her. She had been perfect.

And they had been watching her on that fateful night. And they had taken her.

It had been against everything that he was trying to promote, but he knew she would be able to forgive.

"This the asshole?" Hopper said as he allowed his gaze to burn over the man.

Caroline, however, remained silent.

"I see you've returned home, One," Brenner spoke solely to her.

Caroline felt Hopper tense behind her at the name he called her. She could feel the anger radiate from him, seeping through his suit.

"You know what happens," Brenner warned her.

"Can someone explain what's happening?" Joyce called out from behind them. "My son is in that thing. Are you responsible for this?"

Brenner let out a laugh.

"I don't think this is a laughing matter, pal," Hopper warned him. "I'll wipe that smile off your goddamn face."

Brenner allowed his laugh to dwindle down to a mere smirk. "Well, you see... when One left with Eleven, she caused all of this," Brenner explained to them. "Her departure from *this* world caused them to take all of these people."

"Do you even know their names?" Joyce asked, bitterly.

"No, I do not," Brenner said, shaking his head. "But what I do know is that for her one life, they have claimed over one hundred."

It was at that moment they turned and saw the other faces of children and teenagers in the mucus wall. Caroline felt sick to her stomach and turned back to Brenner. A gasp escaped both Hopper and Joyce as the realisation sunk in for them.

"I didn't know that would happen," Caroline spoke honestly.

"That's too bad," Brenner said nonchalantly. "If you had stayed then none of this would've happened. You're the reason for all of this. And you're the only one who can put this right."

"What are you saying?!" Hopper growled. "Spit it out."

"He's saying—" Caroline started, soberly. And with a sombre shake to her head. "—I must return here to keep everyone safe."

Just then, an unsettling rattling noise sounded around them; bouncing off the moist walls and racing towards them. The growl of a familiar friend pierced her ears as its elongated slimy limbs crept around the corner, its large mouth revealed rows of sharp teeth as a snarl erupted from it as it captured her scent.

"I've seen that before..." Joyce whispered, as a gasp escaped her. Caroline turned around with a furrowed brow and allowed her mind to tap into Joyce's as the mother relayed the memory repeatedly, fear creeping into her heart and clinging onto her.

*The wall had resembled a womb, harbouring an unknown figure inside its chamber. It had reached through the wall at her, trying to grasp hold of her.*

Joyce met her gaze just as more snarling and growls filled the air, and they could only watch as more closed in around them.

"Welcome home, One."